Missing migrants: deaths at sea and unidentified bodies in Lesbos

Iosif Kovras and Simon Robins¹

Migrant deaths at sea

In March 2013, a body was found on the shores of Eressos, the village where Sappho the poetess was born, in the west of the island of Lesbos (Dimopoulou 2013). The young woman was the daughter of a Syrian family who had fled the Syrian conflict and sought asylum in the European Union (EU) by crossing the Aegean from Turkey. The girl's mother and sister were also found dead on the same day on the shores of neighbouring villages. The two girls were born in Greece but the family had decided to return to Syria some years before. Their deaths could have been avoided had a new Greek citizenship law – relaxing criteria for the acquisition of Greek citizenship to children of immigrants born in Greece – been implemented (Christopoulos 2012).² The two girls could have legally entered the country as Greek citizens, instead of risking their lives to cross the militarised border illegally. These three deaths reflect the biopolitical power of the two key instruments of contemporary sovereign states, namely control over borders and citizenship.

Incidents of migrants and refugees dying in their efforts to cross the Aegean border and enter Greece and the EU have become a tragic consequence of contemporary EU border policy, as they have in many other parts of the Mediterranean. In October 2013 a shipwreck of unprecedented magnitude near the Italian island of Lampedusa left approximately 364 immigrants dead (Shenker 2013). Deadly incidents have also taken place in the Spanish coastal enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, where migrants and refugees try to reach the EU border (Morcillo 2012). The Mediterranean Sea kills would-be migrants regardless of their legal status, not discriminating between refugees and economic migrants.

One of the key features of EU border policy is that the border is not constructed territorially, but by the sea itself as a potentially fatal barrier to entry. Sea borders remain the entry point of choice for the majority of 'irregular' immigrants to the EU (Frontex 2012), while according to data from Frontex, the EU agency for external border security, the Aegean coast remains the second most common entry point for migrants (Frontex 2013). Hence, the specific nature of the (sea) border, coupled

with the fact that border crossers usually follow illegal and non-conventional channels, increase the risk of deadly accidents. Most importantly, structural flaws in the design of the policy of border security partly account for the growing number of shipwrecks. For example, coastguard patrolling is embedded within a securitisation framework designed to deter illegal migrants from entering the national sovereign territory of the state (Leonard 2010). It is questionable as to the capacity of a deterrence mandate to serve simultaneously the effective rescue of migrants in danger. We cannot address this complex issue here, but it is worth noting that due to the growing incidence of 'push-backs' by coastguards, immigrants often destroy their inflatable dinghies in order to pressure guards to save them, thus increasing the risk of a deadly accident at sea (Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 184). Whilst border security and its relationship to the epidemic of deaths at sea constitutes a highly complex and underexplored phenomenon, this chapter focuses primarily on the management of the dead in the aftermath of a shipwreck as well as the local response to these deaths.

In what follows, we first discuss the theoretical insights that can be drawn from the study of the phenomenon of dead migrants at the EU border, using concepts provided by Agamben's biopolitics. We argue that the body of the dead migrant found within the territorial borders of the EU but denied any of the dignifying obligations that law demands for dead citizens permits an interrogation of both theoretical and practical understandings of the border. We then discuss the case of Lesbos, exploring how the study of the management of dead migrants can shed light on the political and bodily experience of border crossing. It will be shown how the different policies of the state to the crossing of the border by a dead migrant or a live one, as well as the difference in response to a dead citizen and a dead migrant, introduce novel categories of inclusion and exclusion. In the final part of the chapter, we highlight the divergence between the state-led discourse of migration as a threat and its associated securitisation, and the humanitarian response of the people of Lesbos, which has paved the way for the emergence of a 'hybrid' local discourse.

Migrant deaths at sea: theoretical insights

The tragedy of migrants killed attempting to reach the labour markets of EU states is a direct result of a neo-liberal globalisation that encourages liberalisation of all markets except that for workers and people. The growing phenomenon of migrants dying in their effort to cross the EU border poses a double paradox to the founding tenets of the EU. Whilst the EU is based on a principle of free and open movement internally, it has increasingly been defined externally by its commitment to exclude non-citizens from entry to its territory (Wallerstein 2002). Second, although the EU's 'normative power' is based on the premise that human rights are to be respected independent of any political consideration (Manners 2008), this normative power fades when it comes to the deaths of migrants at its borders.

Their deaths, whether bodies are washed up on Europe's southern coastline or lost forever in the depths of the Mediterranean, are a direct result of the securitisation of migration (Karyotis 2012), which reflects an explicitly racial narrative that those fleeing the chaos and misery of the south to the pocket of liberality that is the EU are a security threat. The border has become more prominent in security discourse precisely because it represents the boundary between security and chaos. '[T]he border marks a fundamental biopolitical distinction between life that (literally) counts in the registry of the nation-state, and life that does not' (Boyce 2012: 71).

This discourse impacts upon migrants in a plethora of ways, most notably through the idea that the sea and its dangers to migrants are doing the job of defending the EU's borders against the migrant invasion. This resonates with European states' externalisation of elements of border and immigration control to the territory of states of migrant departure or transit, and to the militarisation of the Mediterranean. The deaths at sea, as a part of this externalisation, successfully delocalise migrant deaths, removing them from the legal and moral purview of Europeans. The legal responsibility for deaths is shifted from the state to the migrant,³ accompanied by a moral shifting of responsibility for the fact of migration, as well as for dignifying and identifying the bodies of migrants found on EU territory.

Critical border studies has increasingly turned to both Foucault's biopolitics and Agamben's concept of *bare life*, understood as what remains when human existence is stripped of the encumbrances of social location and bereft of the qualifications of political inclusion and belonging (Agamben 1998). Politics for Agamben is an ongoing tension between inclusion and exclusion, between forms of life that the sovereign will protect and represent and those it will not: this defines the meaning of what it is to be human and thereby identifies an exception, the migrant as something other than human, which, for whatever reason, cannot be made sense of in terms of the nation-state. This prescription resonates with how the EU and its member states treat migrants at their borders. Increasingly in critical border studies Agamben's powerful conceptualisation is reduced to an understanding of mere 'exclusion'. Its power, however, lies precisely in the fact that bare life revolves around the zone of indistinction between 'outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion' that is created by sovereign power (Agamben 1998: 91). The liminality of bare life coincides with the illegal migrant's effort to negotiate both border and sovereignty, confined to a status without the 'right to have rights' (Arendt 1951: 177), even when within the borders of an entity such as the EU. Sovereign power in contemporary Europe lets migrants die at the border by framing their deaths as accidents, unrelated to the machinery of militarisation and securitisation that accompanies those deaths (Albahari 2006).

The literature has reached a consensus that borders are not value-free; rather, they reflect sovereign strategies of political inclusion and exclusion (Johnson and Jones 2011: 62). The most important innovation of the border is that it serves as a

tool of inclusion (for the in-group, largely citizens), but at the same time excludes the rest of humanity. As Paasi (2011: 62) argues: 'bordering separates and brings together. Borders allow certain expressions of identity and memory to exist while blocking others.' We argue that common graves and the political lives of migrants even after their death highlight the power of contemporary borders in institutionalising power relations. The sovereign state assigns migrant bodies a status that is inconsistent with full recognition of the personhood of the migrant. We subscribe to the performative model of the border (Salter 2011) and argue that the study of the phenomenon of missing migrants can shed analytical and critical light on the study of contemporary borders. As a non-governmental organization (NGO) activist stressed:

the question of the dead is the most appalling spectacle I have ever seen, because I visualized the death and what it means not to be able to cross the border. So, the theoretical framework about walls, securitization, acquires a new dimension when you see decomposed bodies. Even more tragic is the fact that you cannot bury them as they deserved to be buried and that no one could identify them.

The sovereign state has physical boundaries – the border – but also political and legal boundaries – membership, largely defined by citizenship (Aleinikoff 2001). The fact that the border is defined not territorially but by the capacity of the Mediterranean Sea to kill migrants trying to reach the EU, coupled with the lack of legal status their bodies have on EU soil, denied the rights and entitlements of citizenship, leads to migrants becoming 'missing'. For every migrant body washed up on Europe's beaches, there is a family awaiting news from a son or husband.

The biopolitical concern over the management of the living is not reflected in management of the dead. When 'illegally' (alive) within the EU, migrants forgo many of the rights that citizens take for granted; being subject to surveillance, controlled and limited, they are the subjects of perhaps more of the state's attention than any other class of person. When dead within the EU, they are denied even the limited attention that law obliges for a European body. A live migrant is thus a threat to be managed, while a dead one appears as an irrelevance to be ignored. The situation is not peculiar to Lesbos or to Greece, as is evident from the Italian island of Lampedusa:

While the living that arrive to Lampedusa are instantly engulfed within the governmentally run, and international organization influenced, judicial and medical matrix, from which they can only emerge under the labels of either economic migrants, refugees or expellable persons, the dead that make it to Lampedusa ... are dealt with by local municipalities and people, and, unless identified and repatriated, are granted indefinite leave to remain. (Zagaria 2012)

We seek to understand living migrants as objects of interest to and under the control of biopolitical regimes, and conceptualise their deaths as vital to how sovereign power and the nation-state operate. Yet, once migrants are dead, they become

marginal to the concerns of the biopolitical: the body of the migrant occupies an indeterminate space that is neither fully inside nor outside the social and legal order. For the body of the migrant the idea of 'inside' and 'outside' that appears at the heart of the concept of the border is largely irrelevant: the body is an object of disdain wherever it is found, consistent with Foucault's understanding of the remit of the interest of sovereign power:

[D]eath becomes, insofar as it is the end of life, the term, the limit, or the end of power too. Death is outside the power relationship. Death is beyond the reach of power, and power has a grip on it only in general, overall, or statistical terms. ... Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death. (Foucault 2003: 248)

The EU has failed even in Foucault's 'statistical terms', not even being able to count how many migrants die. This is compounded by a refusal to ensure that states do what they can to identify migrant bodies, confirming they remain not only uncouned and unmourned but unnamed, denied the one thing that could humanise them: states have abandoned responsibility for either the life or death of the victim. 'Disappearance produces a condition of uncertainty and liminality – an undocumented individual subjected to an undocumented death – such that this death not only fails to count as a crime, but even to count as death' (Boyce 2012: 77).

The maintenance of a determined ignorance of migrant deaths at the Mediterranean border by member states and EU institutions is only occasionally threatened by an incident of such proportions that it cannot be ignored.⁴ For the populations of the island communities most exposed to them, however, the deaths of migrants are traumatic precisely because they are frequent, visible and impossible to ignore. The empirical work of this study indicates that the people of Lesbos reject the securitised vision of immigrants promoted by the Greek state and the EU, and attempt both to push local institutions to take action and bypass them to act on their humanitarian impulses as best they can. One way of perceiving this contrast between state discourse and popular understandings on Lesbos is in terms of a centre-periphery model with the political and biopolitical perspectives of the centre remote from both local governance on the island, which must actually deal with migrant bodies, and from opinion shaped by regular exposure to the dead (e.g. Shils 1975). More relevant, however, may be Migdal's model of 'state-in-society', which 'depicts society as a *mélange* of social organisations, rather than a dichotomous structure' (Migdal 2001: 49). The range of social organisations that exist alongside the state are seen to be constantly competing to construct social norms: societies are ultimately a product of this ongoing dynamic struggle. In such a model, state discourse (paralleled by and echoing that of the EU) is merely one source of norms, challenged by NGOs and others and – for the people of Lesbos – by a daily experience that contradicts that discourse. The *mélange* model may be particularly relevant for weaker states, and the experience of the research reported here is that the

Greek state, even while a member of the EU, is unable – or unwilling – to enforce legal norms at its borders when they concern dead migrants. In Lesbos the result is that locally formed perspectives can challenge, in a limited way, the biopolitical discourse of the centre. The practical orientation of this work seeks to address how the periphery can influence the centre, and how state policy can be impacted by those who live at the border and who actively resist both the securitisation agenda and the racialised neglect of migrant bodies.

The body of the dead migrant, found within the territorial borders of the EU but denied any of the dignifying rights that law demands for dead citizens, permits an interrogation of both theoretical and practical understandings of the border. In this chapter, the following themes will be pursued:

- The nature of governmentality and the difference in the response of the state to the crossing of the border by a dead migrant or by a living one, as well as the difference in response to a dead citizen and a dead migrant.
- The failure of the Greek state to make significant efforts either to ensure the dignity of dead migrants in terms of appropriate burial or to identify the dead and ensure that relatives are informed.
- The divergence between the state-led discourse of migration as a threat and the resulting securitisation, and the humanitarian response of the people of Lesbos to the deaths on their beaches.

Missing: the political and bodily experience of the border

Since the mid-1900s the Aegean islands have been the scene of humanitarian disasters that have generated a constant flow of refugees. The first major wave of refugees came as a result of the forced expulsion of the Orthodox population from Asia Minor by Kemal Ataturk in 1922: destitute refugees flooded the Aegean islands (Clark 2006). During the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of Greece, Greek citizens crossed the Aegean in an effort to reach Turkish shores and join the resistance forces in the Middle East (primarily Lebanon and Egypt).⁵ Although during the height of the Cold War refugee flows declined, throughout the 1980s Kurds and leftists persecuted by the military regime in Turkey crossed the Aegean border to seek asylum in Greece and other European countries.

More recently, and especially after the destabilisation of the Middle East, massive waves of refugees and immigrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Egypt started inundating the Aegean islands, which have become a principal entry point to the EU (see Figure 8.1). Although accurate data remains unavailable, it is estimated that in the period 2007–8 the number of arrested ‘illegal’ immigrants entering the Aegean was 29,000 (Troumpeta 2012: 21). The construction of a wall in the region of Evros in 2012 in an effort to deter border crossers entering from Turkey, coupled with the turmoil in Syria, led to a dramatic increase in the flow of migrants to the

8.1 Map showing location of Lesbos

Aegean islands, as the main local border to enter the EU. In the first quarter of 2013, 1,623 irregular migrants were arrested in the Aegean islands, compared to only 118 in the same period the previous year (UNHCR 2013). Lesbos, the biggest island in that part of the Aegean, has become the main entry point for migrants.

One of the most disturbing and underexplored phenomena associated with the most recent surge of border crossing in the Aegean is the growing number of migrants who die when their overcrowded and often flimsy vessels sink. Mountz (2011: 118) has argued that ‘nation-states are using islands to capture liminal populations, [...] facilities on islands serve the purpose of isolating migrants from communities of advocacy and legal representation, and in some cases from asylum claim processes that can only be accessed by landing on sovereign territory’. We show that although islands are sometimes strategically deployed to institutionalise this exclusion, the direct experience of shocking events such as mass fatalities in shipwrecks, coupled with more personal ties to local authorities, create opportunities for advocates for migrants to address effectively some of the problems.

The political lives of migrant bodies

In her book on the ‘political lives’ of dead bodies, Verdery (2000) captures the symbolic capital of human remains and how these are deployed by political leaders to meet political objectives. The graves of unidentified migrants are politically significant because of the absence of political capital invested in them; in essence, it is the silence that circumscribes these graves that makes them politically potent.

Some of these silences became more evident during our fieldwork on Lesbos in 2013 when, using a snowball sampling technique, we conducted semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders, NGO workers and members of migrant communities on the island.⁶ The most revealing experience was a visit to the local cemetery

where the remains of most migrants who die in their effort to cross the Aegean are buried. The graveyard was shocking and disturbing, with bodies covered by earth with no proper marker or headstone.

As Figures 8.2 and 8.3 show, the only mark on the graves of migrants is a broken stone on which is written the (purported) nationality of the migrant, a number and a date of death.⁷ According to a local activist, since the identity of the victim is rarely known, the nationality is based either on information from survivors of shipwrecks

8.2 Grave of victims of a 2007 shipwreck, Mytilene cemetery, Lesbos, July 2013

8.3 Graves of victims of a 2013 shipwreck, Mytilene cemetery, Lesbos

or on an informed guess on the part of the authorities. A local priest argued that since there is no credible way to identify the body in the absence of documentation, 'individuals become a number in the cemetery of Mytilene'. As Sant Cassia (2005) shows for Cyprus, the issue of missing persons and the scale of the phenomenon can often become a powerful political symbol. In fact, a long-standing central tenet of Greek foreign policy on Cyprus has been to put pressure on Turkey to identify the remains of the bodies of the missing, framed as a fundamental right of the relatives. Yet, at the same time, cemeteries along the external borders of Greece are full of unmarked graves containing the unidentified bodies of migrants who died in their effort to cross the Aegean. Certain bodies thus clearly do not count once they are dead bodies. Butler (2010) has distinguished between persons who are 'grievable', whose lives are seen to matter and to be worthy of grief after death, and those who are not 'grievable'. This points to a connection between those marginalised in life, such as irregular migrants, and those unmourned in death: only by giving such people a value in life can they have a value in death. As Green (2012) suggests, the process of identification of the remains depends on citizenship, which thereby introduces a novel exclusion, this time of the dead.

In an effort to understand the procedure following a shipwreck and the burial of the victims, as well as to identify the state agencies tasked with managing this problem, we turned to the local authorities. It quickly became obvious that there is a legal and bureaucratic ambiguity around the problem, creating a grey area where no authority assumed responsibility. The coastguard maintained that his duty is limited to handing over the dead body to the hospital, after which responsibility is passed to the district attorney. Assuming that the death is not caused by criminal action, the district attorney ceases to take responsibility, and the body is left in the local hospital with the forensic surgeon, whose duty ends with the examination of the corpse. To our question as to what happens next, the forensic surgeon had no answer, explaining only that speedy burial was necessary as at the time the hospital had no facilities to store bodies for more than a few days. The director of social services at the hospital subsequently told us that in general they take care of the unidentified bodies, although the hospital has no budget for burying dead 'illegal' migrants, only for the short-term treatment of living migrants. When asked how a dead body can carry a legal status ('illegal', in this case) allocated only to the living, she politely suggested we speak with the mayor, as due to lack of funds the hospital usually asks the municipality to take responsibility for the burial. In the end, it became obvious not only that there is no standardised procedure to deal with the bodies of migrants, but also that this grey area serves to ensure that local authorities take no legal or moral responsibility.

Those familiar with Greek bureaucracy might interpret this as a common tactic of 'blame avoidance'. Yet, we argue that the management of dead migrants reveals a more deep-seated structural pattern of power relations and material interests. As Green (2012: 576) puts it: 'borders always involve a form of classification and

categorisation of the world'; on Lesbos this entails a distinction between living and dead border crossers. A range of specific legal statuses are ascribed to the former, such as 'legal', 'illegal' and 'asylum seeker'; and, following the detention of 'illegal' immigrants, administrative procedures are very detailed, with responsibility for them residing with the central government, since they are regarded as a threat to national security. By contrast, the management of the bodies of dead border crossers is circumscribed by legal and bureaucratic ambiguity. Migrant deaths are seen as a mere accidental deviation from the (securitisation) norm, and their management left in the hands of local authorities.⁸ In the face of the failure of the authorities to identify bodies, even in the unlikely event that they are informed by a survivor, the families of the dead cannot afford the exorbitant cost of identification and repatriation of remains. Thus, while poor (living) migrants experience the greatest barriers to *entering* the EU, it is also these poorest families which face the most difficulty with *exiting* the EU when their migrant relatives are dead. As a result, their bodies are destined to stay in common graves.

The growing incidence of shipwrecks and deaths along the Aegean coast has generated new categories and divisions even among dead migrants, further institutionalising power relations. As exploitation often thrives in contexts of human grief and vague legal procedures, it is hardly surprising that the identification and repatriation of the bodies has become subject to exploitation by smugglers, whose networks continue to thrive in the aftermath of a shipwreck. Smugglers are usually the first to know about a shipwreck and to inform the families of those affected, who then enlist the smugglers' help to identify and return the body (Interview 4). This was confirmed by an interview with migrants who were actively engaged in one of the burials on Lesbos. Despite its obvious importance to the families, the repatriation of the corpse is an extremely complicated and expensive procedure. As a consequence, only a handful of families have managed to get bodies back. A local journalist evocatively referred to this as the 'contraband of human souls'. Migrants currently residing in Lesbos revealed that they were aware of only two families which had managed to repatriate their dead relatives, and that they were able to do so only because one of the victims was a relative of an Afghan minister who mobilised the Afghan embassy in Athens to intervene with the Greek bureaucracy.⁹ Of the 22 bodies from the shipwreck concerned, presumably all from Afghanistan, the Afghan embassy intervened in only two cases.

Our interviews with a group of migrants who had participated in the burial of the victims of one of the biggest shipwrecks in December 2012 confirmed the expense and difficulty of repatriation. One remarked: 'most frequently the family does not have the money to bring them [bodies] back as the money is usually spent to pay the smugglers. Only the rich get back, the poor stay here.' The cemetery of Agios Panteleimon where migrants are buried was once the cemetery of the destitute, a symbolic association not lost on those concerned.

Moreover, as long as the death of migrants is framed as an accident, their burial is

seen as an act of benevolence, rather than an act of justice or a moral obligation on the part of the state. For example, the former mayor of Lesbos clearly indicated that there was no budget (allocated by the state or the EU) to cover the expenses associated with the burial of migrants. To organise a burial he had to raise funds from local sponsors or 'beg local offices organising funeral services to give us the coffins'.

The border raises a number of further obstacles to the treatment of the dead. Following a shipwreck the relatives usually attempt to visit the island to identify the body and, if possible, repatriate it. Yet families frequently experience difficulties entering Greece and are turned away or even detained for several days because they do not have the correct documents. In the meantime, the body is buried and the families left without a body to mourn. One observer told us of Abbas, 'who came to find his father; he had documentation and he came from Germany where he resided permanently. When he came to the port the border agency thought his papers were faked and denied entry. He then tried to come again, this time by airplane, but he had the same problem and we [members of the NGO] had to intervene to release him.'

The border also introduces a novel distinction between the local dead and the remains of migrants. Not only are the unidentified bodies of migrants buried in common graves without following the appropriate religious custom and rituals, but as space in Greek cemeteries decreases, there is pressure to exhume migrant bodies to create space for locals. The gravedigger informed the leader of a local civil society group that 'there is no space available; next time we have a shipwreck there will be no space'. His tone was compassionate, yet he also seemed to imply that the burial of local dead should take moral precedence over foreigners. Moreover, most dead migrants will never be identified. According to Greek death rituals, some years after the burial – usually five to seven – the remains must be exhumed and returned to the family. If no one claims the remains, they are disposed of. There is therefore no realistic possibility of identifying the remains of a migrant who died in a shipwreck more than seven years earlier. Identification is also made more problematic by the unscrupulous and unsystematic burial of migrants. A member of a local civil society group told us of a relative of a migrant who died on the neighbouring island of Chios. Although he had travelled from Australia and had spent a fortune trying to trace and identify his dead relative, the gravedigger could not remember the precise burial spot, and no systematic data was stored as to which body was buried where. Once a tractor started digging, it became clear that he was buried in a mass grave along with other victims, making identification impossible.

The reaction of the islanders to migrant deaths

The shocking experiences related to the deaths at sea and migrant bodies washing up on local beaches set the stage for the emergence on Lesbos of a small, yet vocal, civil society response in support of migrants. Green (2012: 149) has suggested that

the locals show sympathy for migrant bodies primarily because they are not buried or mourned according to their religious and cultural preferences. As a local activist indicated: 'these people do not die *en masse* in urban cities like Athens or Salonika but at the borders, in the islands. So, in this local context the mobilisation of the community can provide a quicker and more effective solution to the problem.'

The traumatic experiences of dead bodies and common graves bring shame upon the people of Lesbos. The degrading situation in the detention camps on the island was another source of shame. For several years hundreds of migrants were gathered under humiliating conditions in the asylum camp of Pagani (Troumpeta 2012: 21). The camp was closed in 2009 following the mobilisation of the local community. These shocking and shameful images are part of the islanders' daily life. Following the closure of the asylum camps, migrants were detained in the island's main port of Mytilene, corralled in the open air for days at a time without access to washing facilities or food and exposed to extreme heat and cold. Such conditions, coupled with the fact that most local families are refugees from what is now Turkey, partly explain why islanders are more predisposed to see migrants in a humanitarian light. Even those locals who subscribe to the policy of securitisation, and who refer to the border crossers as 'illegal', are critical of the 'Eurocrats' who use the island as a filter to prevent the human flow from entering the core of the EU. One argued, for instance, that 'the bodies are washed up here, not in Germany'. In essence, they feel that this is a broader problem that cannot be managed by the local community and which gives it bad publicity.

These local experiences have created the space for a small but active civil society group to help immigrants, at times quite effectively.¹⁰ The islanders have adopted a 'hybrid' position between policies of securitisation and humanitarianism towards migrants and thus conceptualise the border very differently from mainland Greeks. As the leader of the group pointed out, the locals 'see this as primarily a humanitarian problem, not a political one'. In the following section, we argue that the humanitarian lens through which locals approach the problem is not limited to the community, but also involves the local authorities. In turn, this has created opportunities for civil society to push for the accommodation of migrant demands, at times even replacing the sovereign state. To explore this further, we examine the interaction between local advocates for migrants and state agents at the border to show how this interaction influences state policy.

Borders, state capacity and opportunities

There is no single border in the abstract; borders are always context-specific, relational and performative. The state's capacity to play out the symbolic and tangible politics of the border is thus pivotal. Much literature on (critical) border studies is built on the study of powerful states, including the United States, Canada, Australia and the EU (as a supranational institution). Whilst every state's objective is to

reaffirm its sovereignty, especially with regard to the border as one of the central state institutions, state effectiveness varies from country to country. In this sense, the study of the Greek state and how the border plays out on the island of Lesbos is instructive. In addition to being the scene of substantial flows of refugees and migrants over the past century, the Aegean islands have also been the centre of the Greco-Turkish dispute, one of the most significant aspects of which is the legal definition of the continental shelf and territorial sea, essentially the border (Heraclides 2010). In fact, the 'Aegean dispute' has made islands like Lesbos some of the most heavily militarised Greek territories. The presence of the army is visible in the daily lives of the islanders as there are military vehicles and hundreds of soldiers in the island's capital of Mytilene. The national border remains a powerful daily practice in that specific part of the Aegean.

Even when a state strives to perform its sovereignty, however, it can lack the capacity to do so in a robust way: in Greece this creates opportunities for local advocates for migrants. The literature offers a picture of the state as being a purposeful and unitary actor that is able to implement its policies, while in reality the case of Greece reveals a slightly different story. The arbitrary interpretation of rules and laws for most scholars is seen as an intentional strategy of 'nation-states [to] exploit legal ambiguity' (Mountz 2011: 118); yet, at times this grey area creates opportunities for local groups to influence, oppose and even contravene state decisions (Migdal 2001).

The heavy structure of the Greek bureaucracy, and the personal ties that are often seen as the root cause of corruption and clientelism at the local level in Lesbos, provide a breathing space for local advocates for migrants. A leading member of the group expressed this as follows:

[W]e know each other from other activities, so you have a specific identity, a quality as an individual and this has multiple advantages: access to public services, understanding how the local community is functioning ... and this is an important point distinguishing islands, as personal contacts create more durable relationships with local authorities which at the end of the day are more effective.

This dense network of contacts in a small island like Lesbos has provided local civil society with opportunities to engage and promote effectively the demands of migrants, which at times challenged state policies, or even substituted for the state.

An example of local society substituting for the state is the establishment of the first 'open' reception centre for migrants. By late 2012 the dramatic increase in the influx of migrants created a major problem for the local authorities which could not accommodate them in local penitentiaries. In response, a group of local activists asked the mayor for permission to reopen a children's campsite in order to accommodate them. A local doctor who worked closely with migrants and refugees vividly described this initiative:

It was an unprecedented and innovative action that contravened the mainstream model of reception centres for immigrants. That was an open public space of hospitality where migrants are not detained [and] where everyone could visit and volunteer. ... So something unprecedented occurred with regards to the strategic planning of the government on immigration: while they used to send them to ghettos and detention camps ... it became clear that an open reception centre could be even more effective under the auspices of the local community, the collaboration of the migrants themselves and the solidarity of the people.

In fact, the same participant told us that the local authorities were actually relieved because a particularly pressing problem, the responsibility for accommodating migrants, was taken off their hands by local people. In other words, a responsibility, deemed to be emblematic of sovereign authority at the border – the management of detention camps – was successfully assumed by the local community. Most importantly, the state authorities (at local level) subtly consented to relinquishing these sovereign powers to the local people.

The direct exposure of local authorities – whose responsibility is to secure the border – to these traumatic experiences and pressing problems associated with the management of the massive influx of migrants has made them sometimes deviate from the policy of securitisation deployed by the central government and the EU. By contrast, the 'hybrid' discourse that at local level encompasses policies of both securitisation and humanitarianism has enabled local advocates to address effectively some of the most urgent problems facing newly arrived migrants.

When asked about the most important obstacle migrants face, the police security director in the port of Mytilene replied: 'it's the phenomenon per se. It's a humanitarian disaster. Many people within Greece, but especially in Europe, are not aware of the magnitude of the problem. We are tasked to deal with a humanitarian crisis.' He thought of the problem as a shameful event for the island, as 'it exposes the island and the country globally'. This did not prevent the same individual from referring to asylum seekers as 'illegal', thereby remaining loyal to the securitisation discourse. This 'hybridity' is a prevalent feature of the discourse adopted by locals and clearly deviates from the state discourse. It emerged in most interviews and informal chats on the island. For example, the mayor of Lesbos condemned the central government for its failure to appreciate the humanitarian dimension of the problem, saying that 'in Athens [the government] doesn't understand that the problem is growing'.

Representatives of the state whose responsibility it is to implement the securitisation agenda on Lesbos thus feel that they are required to deal with a problem exceeding their powers. Their daily duties bring them into contact with some of the cruellest experiences of this humanitarian disaster and lead them to question the capacity of 'securitisation' to address its complexities. As a result, it is not only ordinary people who distance themselves from the securitisation discourse, but also the local authorities, thereby creating what Wilson and Donnan have called 'ambivalent

border communities' (2012: 11). It is this sense of indeterminacy, combined with the porous organisation of the Greek state, which creates opportunities for local activists to push for more effective responses to certain problems. Over the years, those who advocate on behalf of migrants have established relations of trust with the local authorities, and this has enabled them to press for specific demands, such as DNA tests on missing migrants, or support for 'illegal' migrants when organising the burial of a compatriot.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored some of the issues emerging from the study of those border crossers who did not make it across the frontier and who died at sea. In sharp contrast to the growing media coverage of shipwrecks in the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea, a notable silence surrounds the management of the dead bodies of border crossers following these disasters. This is a consequence of attempts to frame these deaths as 'accidents' within a broader policy of securing EU borders, a policy which remains intact. Yet, this approach fails to account not only for the growing number of 'accidents', but also most significantly for the complete silence surrounding the management of drowned migrants. Following the prevalent approach which introduces a number of legal distinctions among living border crossers – 'illegal vs. legal' or 'refugees vs. economic' migrants – once dead the very same individuals are stripped of all legal status as human beings entitled to inalienable human rights. As the chapter has shown, the border continues to be a powerful instrument of the sovereign state, denying both dead migrants and their relatives a decent burial and the identification of remains. In essence, the management of dead migrants – missing to their relatives – sheds light on the important, yet underexplored, bodily and political experiences of crossing the border.

The island of Lesbos is at the sharp end of the EU's securitisation agenda in response to the increasing flow of migrants. Islanders have seen an escalating toll of migrant bodies on their beaches which local and national authorities have chosen largely to ignore. While living migrants are subsumed in the rigours of the biopolitical response to their presence, detained and controlled by the sovereign state, those who die making the journey are ignored and neglected.

The experience of Lesbos is not an exception but echoes a growing phenomenon in international politics where more heavily militarised border enforcement has increased the level of human suffering. At the Mexico–US border, for example, concerted operations of the US government seeking to deter undocumented migrants from Mexico since the late 1990s have had dire humanitarian consequences, leading to thousands of deaths at the border (Cornelius 2001). In both Lesbos and the Arizona desert, migrant deaths have acted as a catalyst for a proactive mobilisation of local NGOs and humanitarian groups (Hagan and Rodriguez 2006; Hellman 2009). In Arizona the 'Humane Borders' group has set up a programme to create

maps identifying the locations of migrant deaths, while interfaith organisations such as the 'No More Deaths' group have tried to save lives by leaving water and food for those crossing the desert (Zanowski 2006).

The comparative experience of deaths in Lesbos and the Mexico–US border exemplifies a common theme of the corporeality of border crossing. The interaction between corporeality and spatiality drives the subjectivity of migrant bodies. While the border determines the subjectivity of a living migrant body, the dead migrant bodies produced by the border are objects of far less interest to sovereign power than the bodies of citizens. A performative understanding of the construction of the border sees the border being built by and upon the bodies of migrants.

Notes

- 1 The authors are listed in alphabetical order; equal contribution is implied. We are very grateful to Hastings Donnan, Effie Latsoudi, Katerina Polychroni, Anna Vallianatou and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback on earlier drafts of the chapter.
- 2 This reform of Greek citizenship law was originally enacted in 2010 (N. 3838/2010): 'Current provisions for Greek citizenship, the political participation of repatriated Greeks and lawfully resident immigrants and other provisions.' However, in February 2011 the Greek Council of State ruled that the article relating to the naturalisation of the children of migrants born in Greece was unconstitutional. Subsequently, the law was revised and the new provisions once again restricted the naturalisation of children of immigrants born in Greece.
- 3 A recent trend has been to portray the migrant as a passive victim and instead to blame traffickers, who remain essentially invisible.
- 4 An example is that of the deaths of more than 300 migrants off the coast of Lampedusa in October 2013 that briefly saw the issue trouble the front pages of European news media.
- 5 For an excellent account of this phenomenon of border crossing, based on oral history, see Makridakis 2010.
- 6 The vast majority of interviews were semi-structured in an effort to make it easier for the interviewees to express their views. Most were conducted in Greek, but a number of the interviews with immigrants residing in Lesbos were carried out with the support of a translator who facilitated the interviews. We are indebted to Katerina Polychroni for her invaluable support.
- 7 Indicative of the arbitrary and uncoordinated procedure for recording migrant burials is the fact that at different periods there have been different approaches to keeping track of migrant graves. When shipwrecks were less frequent, the information on the grave included the nationality and the number of the victim of the specific shipwreck (e.g. 'Afghan 2'), often on a marble cross taken from a recently exhumed grave of a local. More recently, with the increase in the number of shipwrecks, coupled with the greater diversity in the origins of migrants, it became more difficult to determine the nationality of the victims (see Figure 8.3).

- 8 As is also the case in Lampedusa in Italy (Zagaria 2012: 18).
- 9 Access to official data on the number of repatriated bodies was not possible, so we turned to local participants who had helped families in their efforts to trace their relatives lost at sea. This raises a broader problem of access to and credibility of data gathered by national authorities, revealing the 'grey area' that circumscribes the management of migrant bodies.
- 10 The primary organisation, 'The Village of All Together' (*Το Χωριό του Όλοι Μαζί*), is an umbrella group of different sub-groups, all active in the reception and accommodation of migrants. Due to the growing number of shipwrecks, they have recently become active in managing the problem of the dead as well.

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