

# ÁGNOSTOI: GREECE AND THE FORENSIC BORDERING OF FORTRESS EUROPE

## ABSTRACT

This article explores migrant disappearances and border deaths at the Greek borderlands through the notion of forensic bordering. Based on fieldwork in the Evros region, Athens and its surroundings, and on the island of Lesbos, I argue that disappearance and non-identification in the event of death are effectively border violence by other means. Three forms of symbolic and political post-mortem border violence are then explicated: the act of disappearance, the act of non-identification, and the act of denying proper mourning. Crucially, this article unpacks the underlining logic that, if migrants from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East are not supposed to cross the border in the first place, their existence and, ultimately, their equal humanity can be similarly denied in death. If the forensic sciences are generally perceived positively as means to provide answers, closure, accountability, and truth, forensic bordering seeks to do the exact opposite, rejecting accountability and employing silence as a deterrence.

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Keywords: disappearances, border violence, European Union, forensics, Greece, migration

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## INTRODUCTION

‘I thank Greece for being our European  
*ασπίδα* [*Aspida*, “shield”] in these times.’

– Ursula von der Leyen, President of the  
European Commission

Some of the dead among us are meant to be seen. They are remembered in speeches, sometimes even revered. Graves are often the concrete sites of honouring and remembering, invested with personal—and sometimes cultural and political—significance. They also stand as an affirmation that the deceased has, indeed, left the realm of the living; treated with respect, and sent off according to socially

and culturally accepted rituals. Some graves acquire a specific role in how we perceive, write, represent, and reproduce history; sites such as the graves of the ‘Unknown Soldier’ around the world have no name but serve the purpose of consolidating a particular national narrative and social memory. Others are an extension of the influence a person carried in their life: The Street of Tombs in the ruins of Kerameikos dates back to third and fourth centuries BC and consists of the graves of notables from ancient Athens. Their monuments—statues, pillars, and gravestones—are intended to reflect their societal position and wealth, to be seen and marvelled at. Their affluence and standing have allowed them to be embedded into the very

historical and cultural fabric of ancient Greece; thousands of years later, they, too, represent what for the dominant European intellectual narrative is crucially the home of philosophy, the arts, and the sciences. There is a heightened sense of visibility in such graves, and the past they stand for, as with the graves of the ‘notables’ of our time, from intellectuals to politicians, artists and athletes to royalty.

However, not all dead are afforded similar levels of visibility. Not all dead are allowed to leave the realm of the living or afforded the customary ritual attention and respect. This article looks at the bodies that, as a continuation of their *disappearability* (Laakkonen 2022) in life, remain invisible in death; unnamed, unidentified, and more often than not, uncared for; namely, migrants<sup>1</sup> who have died at the Greek borderlands. In the best tradition of the Greek dramas of antiquity, there is a particular irony in the fact that while some stay with us through millennia—like the Athenian notables lining the Street of Tombs—others are all but stripped of their social and political life, even their name, upon their death. They are the *ἀγνώστοι* (*ágnostoi*, ‘unknown’, singular *ἀγνώστος*, *ágnostos*). If we take as our starting point Robert Hertz’s (1960: 27) notion that there is a moral obligation to care for the dead, which sets human bodies apart from animal carcasses, then we can argue that there are, indeed, groups of humans who do not seem to count as proper humans. In this case, the disappeared migrants, or their unknown bodies, the unwelcome, the reviled, and the despised, do not seem to be afforded the care which would qualify them as equal human beings.<sup>2</sup>

My arrival to migrant disappearances was the entwining of two different paths: one interested in marginalisation and violence from an academic perspective, the other being a grass-roots migrants’ rights activist. Beginning

in 2018 and doing the majority of my fieldwork between the summer of 2019 and spring of 2020, I travelled around and along the Greek borderlands in the Evros region and Athens as well on the island of Lesbos. Seeking to draw a ‘map’ of sorts of migrant disappearances and border deaths, among other things I spent time with and talked to local residents, migrants at various stages of their journeys, staff from different international humanitarian organisations, and forensic professionals. These discussions often took place on the condition of anonymity or involved individuals in precarious situations. Thus, in this article I have intentionally included only as little identifying contextual information as is necessary for such excerpts to be intelligible.

I also joined a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) receiving border crossers in the Aegean, photographed and collected items left behind on the ‘migrant trail’ (De León and Wells 2015), and mapped cemeteries. I looked at the news reports of so-called ‘migrant fatalities’ and compared them to the available statistics. In Greece, and during follow-up inquiries carried out online, I encountered numerous unknown bodies and names looking for a body, but also missing files, mistaken identities, and institutional negligence building up to what, following Thom Davies, Arshad Isakjee, and Surindar Dhesi (2017: 1269), could be called violent inaction. But, here, this violent inaction was directed not at the living, but the dead—or those liminally somewhere in between.

Due to the nature of my research interest, that is, disappearances, I often dealt with the aftermath of the event rather than its emergence since as I tried piecing together the context in which those unknown bodies and names lacking a body (Laakkonen 2023) existed, employing a ‘negative methodology’, also looking at what was not there (Laakkonen 2023; Navarro 2020).

This included learning about the procedures and practices involved in investigating and identifying the dead—or about the failures and shortcomings of said procedures and practices. Equally, it involved learning to not only document but to ‘listen’ to the material remains left behind: torn dinghies, empty water bottles, and life jackets unfit for seafaring lying on the beaches; backpacks, shoes, babies’ dummies, and packets of medicine left along the railway tracks. This ethnographic context-building, augmented by learning from and with living humans—such as the forensic professionals, refugees and migrants, activists, and locals—is concerned with investing these material remains with a sense of humanity (Laakkonen 2023), the very quality border violence in its many forms<sup>3</sup> seeks to deny. These physical remains and residues tell of violence, displacement, and movement, and they tell of journeys.

In this article, building on my research, I am concerned with the tension essentially engendered by a struggle over humanity; how migrant bodies are human and, through forensic neglect, not-human at the same time. To unpack this tension, I explore how the presumed moral obligation to care for the dead is suspended, and show how borders, and the concomitant border violence, is imprinted and inflicted on the dead and the unknown as they are inflicted on living border-crossers. If ‘forensics’, broadly speaking, refers to the techniques and technologies employed to establish what happened, when, to whom, and by whom in the aftermath of, for example, an accident or a crime, then the practices that I analyse here do the exact opposite. These practices coalesce into what I call the forensic bordering of Fortress Europe, that is, a deliberate forensic silence and negligence in the aftermath of death and disappearance.

With forensic bordering, I draw from, and somewhat expand, the research and debates on bordering and bordering practices which have flourished in anthropology and other social sciences during the past twenty years. According to Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen (2002: 126), ‘borders do not represent a fixed point in space or time, rather they symbolise a social practice of spatial differentiation’. To account for these differentiations, they focus on *bordering* practices: borders ‘represent an implicit, often taken for granted, agreement among the majority of people’ (ibid.). In other words, a border is ‘thus much more than a protection wall alone. It is a means of saying, representing, glorifying, or resisting a *here*, a *we* and a *them*’ (Van Houtum 2021: 36, emphasis original). In short, border is not a noun but a verb (ibid.): bordering is what people do to realise and demarcate the border they perceive—or wish—to be there. It also includes practices which mark who and what *does not belong* to the bounded space, in this case, migrants looking for refuge and safety inside the European Union.

The notion of ‘bordering’ has been taken up by various scholars (see e.g. De Genova 2017; Kingsolver 2023; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Tervonen, Pellander, and Yuval-Davies 2018) to draw attention to various acts which constitute the border in everyday life, often to deter and/or brutalise those not deemed worthy of crossing the borders. These are people who do not ‘know their place’ in urban spaces, a geographical ordering of nation states, or (post/neo)colonial hierarchies, and includes the poor, the minorities, and the migrants. This often happens through the ways spaces are divided and segregated—‘hostile architectures’ (Petty 2016) such as spikes preventing people from sleeping on the street are but one example—through a myriad of forms of paperwork and legislation, or—in

the case of police and the military—through the license to violence granted to them by the state. The practices I am concerned with in this article, those I have chosen to call forensic bordering, are closely aligned with paperwork, legislation, and state violence, but sometimes involve spatial planning as well, from cemetery maps to detention and camp sites. In *Forensic Architecture* (2017), Eyal Weizman (2017: 27–29) notes how the resolution of publicly available satellite images is not determined by technology, but by legal regulations and fixed at a pixel size where a human body is indistinguishable from the landscape. Similarly, forensic bordering is not just directed at the bodies and disappeared persons. Instead, it is also an attempt to regulate what can be known of migrant border deaths and disappearances along the European Union's borders.

Henk van Houtum and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy (2020) have broken down the European Union's border regime into three bordering mechanisms: the 'pre-borders' of visa documents and bureaucracy which control mobility from afar, the actual surveilled and enforced borders regulating mobility on the spot, and the 'post-borders' of camps and detention centres. Forensic bordering in Greece, in turn, is seamlessly folded into all three mechanisms, but simultaneously operates in a space of its own. As a kind of 'post-post-borders', it looks both backward and forward. On the one hand, forensic bordering is about concealment, as well as about marking bodies—or names without a body—as unwanted, someone who does not belong in Greece. On the other hand, as I have argued elsewhere (Laakkonen 2022) disappearances are cynically intended as a deterrent to would-be border-crossers.

I argue there are three primary forms of political and symbolic violence enacted on the disappeared and their bodies, through 1) the act

of disappearance, 2) the act of non-identification, and 3) the act of denying proper mourning. The first half of this article lays the groundwork for a more detailed discussion of forensic bordering. I begin by defining migrant disappearances and border deaths and then proceed with an overview of Greece as the backdrop against which those disappearances and border deaths take place. In the second half of this article, I explore in more detail forensic bordering through two distinct examples, identification processes and burial practices.

## DISAPPEARANCES, BORDERS, AND BORDERING

The first form of violence enacted on migrant bodies is the disappearance itself. When discussing migrant disappearances and border deaths, it is important to delineate what kind of disappearances fall within the purview of what such terms seek to understand. There are two important dimensions to making this definition: first of all, I am concerned with migrant disappearances alone, not every kind of disappearance, and, second, my interests lie in those who either disappear from their family and loved ones while crossing to Greece and the European Union or those—often undocumented—migrants who end up dead in one of Greece's morgues. Of course, people other than migrants also disappear, but they do not encounter and live with the disappearability brought about by a 'globalised militarised apartheid' (Besteman 2019; see also Kalir 2019; Van Houtum 2010); a hierarchy of mobility and the xenophobic and violent border regime enforcing that hierarchy which is set up—or financed—by states and entities such as the European Union, the United States, or Australia to protect that inequality. The migrants who disappear do so while looking for places to cross

clandestinely, to avoid being pushed back by the border police or the military. Or they do so after a crossing, deep within Greek territory, but in an equally dangerous and marginalised position.

Border deaths as a category are intimately connected to migrant disappearances. This is because a majority of those who die while crossing to Greece—or elsewhere in the Mediterranean—also remain unidentified (see, for example, Last 2015; Pavlidis and Karakasi 2019: 467). Therefore, any initiative aimed at talking about migrant disappearances also prompts us to talk about border deaths. Disappearances and border deaths are also linked on an emotional level, because, as Laura Huttunen (2016: 202) has argued, disappearances engender a sense of liminality: given the context—genocide in Bosnia in Huttunen’s case, here life-risking border crossings—the probability of death is obvious but, simultaneously, the disappearance prevents those left behind from moving on emotionally, socially, and symbolically. There is always a possibility, no matter how unrealistic or improbable, that their loved ones are still alive. The possibly deceased cannot then necessarily be reincorporated—through the burial of the body and/or associated acts of mourning—to the community.

Bordering is a useful concept for our thinking here, because borders, or the act of crossing, should not be perceived merely as something instantiated at lines drawn on maps, at—mostly—internationally recognised borders. Instead, as research on borders has highlighted (e.g. De Genova 2017; Demetriou and Dimova 2018; Green 2013; see also Laakkonen 2020), borders are processes and practices enacted and challenged. They are acted on, enforced, and reconstituted through social and political choices and actions, and they are continuously formed and reformed. Borders are not enforced

and demarcated in practice merely through the ‘spectacular’ (Andersson 2014: 138–139), but also through the hidden and silent; in my research this included the nooks and crannies of everyday governance: morgues, cemeteries, and classified files. Furthermore, just as, for example, passport controls, visa regimes, detention, and police raids do not stop at the borders drawn on the map, neither do border deaths take place there alone. Many of the border deaths I encountered while comparing statistics, collecting news, or talking to forensic professionals or witnesses did, in fact, take place well within the Greek side of the border, such as in abandoned buildings because of hypothermia, in road accidents after police chases, or as people were hit by a passing train while travelling along railway tracks.

If border deaths do not happen strictly speaking at the officially recognised borders, and borders do not reside only where they are drawn, then it logically follows that neither do the disappearances of migrants. As long as people on the move must travel clandestinely to avoid authorities or have no chance of settling and formalising their residence, they are disappearable. The exact time of disappearance is also relative, unless there are witnesses to incidents such as a shipwreck, of course. Does that disappearance take place, in the case of a body, at the presumed or medically determined time of death or when a body cannot be identified? Or is it when someone starts looking for their family member or a loved one they have not heard from in weeks, maybe months? This dilemma, and the way it is subsumed by forensic bordering, further *dislocates* the border—and the disappearance. It is because of this that subject of research into disappearances and border deaths must, to borrow from Ghassan Hage (2005: 466), be treated as a single, but geographically noncontiguous, site; it is not simply constituted

by various sites which are connected, but a site revealing itself differently at different locations (see also Parent 2022: 21). At heart, this site has a simple message to border-crossers from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East: you are disappearable.

## GREECE—AT AND FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION'S BORDERS

Before moving on to a more elaborate discussion of forensic bordering it is important to explore Greece as one crucial site of such practices. The country has occupied a very particular—and tense—position both geographically and in European imaginaries: ‘neither exotic nor wholly familiar’, as Michael Herzfeld (1987: 7) famously observed when critiquing anthropologists’ attempts to define the Mediterranean as a region. Ernestine Friedl (1962: 5) described this sensation of familiarity and strangeness in her classic village study by showing her own surprise at how shoes familiar to North Americans, men’s oxfords and women’s slippers, were used in completely different ways in rural Greece. Moreover, John Davis (1977: 7; cf. Bossevain 1979) noted how ‘mediterraneanists [sic] do not undergo a complete cultural disorientation such as those who work in sub-Saharan Africa or New Guinea sometimes claim to have experienced and benefited from’ but, simultaneously, suffered from a ‘desire to be as primitive as every other colleague’.

Even if anthropological critiques (e.g. Herzfeld 2005; Ben-Yehoyada, Cabot and Silverstein 2022) of such perceptions are now common, in popular debates and the media they continue to flourish. Greece is perceived as the border between Europe and the Eastern non-Europe, outlandish in itself, excluded in its very inclusion. On the one hand, Greece is perceived as a bulwark against

the non-European—essentially non-white—‘other’, or, a ‘shield’ as Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, put it (European Commission 2020). On the other hand, by its proximity to the ‘other’, Greece has often been perceived with exoticising marvel or, at times, orientalist neo-colonialism (Cabot 2019: 262). In the context of migration, Greece is, in European imaginaries, made non-European by the presence of the very people it is expected to keep out. It is ‘contaminated’ by the presence and heightened visibility of the border—and, indeed, the non-white and non-European people outside the border that the European Union and Greece are both enforcing and fortifying.

Greek public has, of course, a markedly different reading of the situation. The financial crash and the subsequent harsh austerity policies overseen by the European ‘Troika’—the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund—ravaged the country economically and enforced a sense of being colonised (Knight 2017), as well as anger towards foreign powers stripping Greece of what once was (Theodossopoulos 2014). Following a significant increase in border crossings from Turkey, Greece, and specifically its Aegean islands, was made into a de facto containment zone for migrants from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, especially through the European Union’s strategy of hotspots (Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020; Vradis et al. 2018). In such an atmosphere of indignation and humiliation, migrants are easily interpreted as a continuation of the very same foreign dominance eating away at Greece’s economic possibilities. My research participant Christos, a man in his late 40s working at a corner shop in a town in Northern Greece near the border, was one of the locals who felt disdain for migrants. He explained, ‘How should I say this?

I mean of course there are people who need help. But how many guests can you welcome to your house? They're not us, they're Muslims. There's a limit. And Erdoğan [the President of Turkey] keeps sending more and more of them.<sup>4</sup> It follows that in a mix of frustration, xenophobia, and a desire to manifest Greece's Europeaness, increasingly violent border enforcement is readily embraced.<sup>5</sup> Not content with being just the 'shield', the Greek border police and military intend to also be the 'spear' at the battlements of Fortress Europe.

Border violence in Greece is not, of course, a sole incident. Pushbacks, where border-crossers are forced—often violently or with the threat of violence—back inside the borders of the country from whence they crossed, are commonplace along the European Union's borders (Border Violence Monitoring Network 2023a; Christides et al 2021a; 2021b; see also Push-Back Map 2023). Equally common are pullbacks, where the police or military of the country migrants are leaving from intercept and capture the would-be border-crossers at the border and force them back. Perhaps the most well-known cases of pullbacks take place on the sea route beginning from Libya, where the so-called Libyan Coast Guard cooperates with Frontex and European Union members' militaries to intercept and forcibly return migrants to Libya (see e.g. Sanderson 2022; Statewatch 2020a). However, the Turkish Coast Guard are also known to stop migrants headed for Greece (see e.g. Sarobmed 2018; Statewatch 2020b) both in the Aegean and at the Evros border. What pushbacks and related border violence do is force migrants into increasingly dangerous routes and greater risk-taking in a bid to cross onto the European Union's soil. This, augmented by an increase in the criminalisation of civilian search and rescue operations and general humanitarian work with migrants (see

e.g. Amnesty 2020; Gionco and Kanics 2022), in turn, leads to more deaths and disappearances. Indifferent, negligent, or even hostile forensic attention seamlessly continues this logic and practice of border violence.

It is also worth noting that border violence in its myriad forms, the pushbacks and pullbacks, the beatings and abuse, the capture and detention, is only the boots on the ground. In the grand scheme of things, what lies behind the violence is of course the European Union's migration policies and visa regime, what Van Houtum (2021: 35) calls 'paper walls'. It is simply extremely difficult for African, Asian, and Middle Eastern nationals, at least those without particular means such as wealth, to gain legal entry to the European Union. This makes clandestine means of travel, hiding in the woods, and crossing the sea in dinghies at night the only viable options for people on the move searching for refuge and safety inside the European Union. This has also led to the proliferation of the use of the category of 'illegal immigrant', and the assumption that individuals seeking to enter the European Union—and Europe more broadly—from the aforementioned parts of the world for any other reason than tourism or business will be deemed illegal and treated accordingly, usually with no questions asked. Fortress Europe rests on a solid diplomatic, economic, political, and legal foundation nurtured over recent decades, since the establishment of the Schengen Area in 1985 and the European Single Market in 1993. It is because of this context, the European Union's concern over its external borders, and the abundant politics of fear (Andersson 2019; Huysmans 2006; Van Houtum and Lacy 2020) that increasingly violent border enforcement in countries like Greece has been condoned, sometimes even supported. The recent revelations that led to the departure of the head of Frontex, Fabrice Leggeri (Rankin

2022), *only* became a problem for the agency—and the European Union—because Frontex’s involvement in pushbacks was made public by large news agencies around Europe. I say this because, during my fieldwork, everyone at the grass-roots level knew what happened at the borders—a voice loud enough to broadcast it was simply missing at the time.

### LESVOS: THE NAMELESS DEAD

Lesvos, in the Aegean Sea in close proximity to Turkey, is the third largest island in Greece, with an area of roughly 1633 square kilometres and 86 000 residents. The island is of volcanic origin and its mountainous geography varies from lush emerald green hills to arid and dusty plains. Major exports include olives from the island’s millions of olive trees and ouzo, a strong aniseed-flavoured liquor, which locals often also enjoy with a meal at local tavernas. The northern coast of Lesvos is a stretch of a little over 30 kilometres of coastline, measured roughly from the village of Molyvos—now Míthymna in Greek—in the west to the village of Tsonia in the east. Despite the tourism industry being a major source of income on the island, most of the northern landscape is a far cry from the picturesque sandy beaches of travel brochures. In fact, in the north of the island most of the coastline consists of beaches that are narrow, rocky, and rough. Among both humanitarians and authorities, this stretch of coastline is commonly referred to as the North Shore.

It is on the North Shore, precisely on the kind of beaches I described above, where the majority of arrivals took place when the migrant crossings intensified in 2015.<sup>6</sup> These beaches remain a popular destination for dinghies and speedboat drop-offs leaving the Turkish coast just some ten kilometres away on the other side of the Aegean Sea. During my fieldwork, the

beaches were littered with rubbish, empty plastic water bottles and soda cans, pieces of packaging materials, sea urchins, animal bones, and faeces. Here and there, the debris of illegalised (De Genova 2002) human mobility, signs of what the *Guardian* (2019) saw fit to refer to as the ‘fearful dispossessed rattling Europe’s gates’ was visible: life vests, scraps of rubber torn from destroyed dinghies, pieces of shiny emergency blankets glistening in the sun, wooden planks from fishing boats, and discarded Turkish residence permits lying around. From the hills of Mount Lepetimnos overlooking the narrow Mediterranean passage, one can observe various layers of mobility, of people and goods: fishing boats, sailing boats, ferries, recreational divers, and cargo ships, as well as the occasional migrant dinghy. In 2019, equally present were those who sought to deter, intercept, and vigil these mobilities: the Hellenic and Turkish coast guards, the British Border Force, and Frontex vessels from various European Union member states such as Italy, Croatia, Portugal, The Netherlands, or Latvia.

‘Here you have the Christians’, the elderly caretaker at the cemetery of Ágios Panteleimonas in Mytilíni, the capital of the island, explained in the summer heat of 2019, making a sweeping gesture with his hand from north to east. He continued, ‘and there... there are the *ágnostoi*’. In the northwest corner of the cemetery, next to a digger and a two-metre pile of rubbish, lay some 70 to 90 graves of migrants buried between 2007 and 2015. The burials stopped in the autumn of 2015, following a shipwreck (Forensic Architecture 2015a) that cost the lives of dozens, over 80 according to my research participants, which forced the local authorities to open a new cemetery for migrants in an olive grove at Kato Tritos. The exact numbers of migrants buried in Ágios Panteleimonas is unknown, because, by the time the restoration



work for this corner of the cemetery began, rain and mudslides had resurfaced a considerable number of bones buried there and moved them around the site, making it impossible to determine how many individuals there were without an extensive forensic investigation. The new graves are uniform in shape and size, with virtually no decoration save for a single pink plastic rose someone had fairly recently placed on a few of them; light grey bricks lined a pile of gravel. Much of the materials seemed to be recycled. On top, instead of a gravestone a marble plaque was placed roughly where the head of the body would normally lie. Some plaques had a name, but most simply carried the word 'ÁGNOSTOS' written in capital letters. Often the plaques also had two sets of numbers, on the first row, the date—or simply the year—of either the recovery or the burial of the body and, on the second row, a registry number from either the coast guard or the pathologist's office that examined the body. The post-mortem examination is often superficial because from a legal point of view, for example, all migrant drownings are treated as accidents which warrant no closer examination—or search for someone responsible. Equally, there has been no common standard regarding what information should be included on the plaques. Sometimes, there are no plaques.

DNA samples were not collected from migrant bodies in Greece until 2015, and the practice is still, eight years later, not monitored in any kind of effective manner. Those buried at Ágios Panteleimonas without a name will stay that way—this is not a cemetery from where repatriations of bodies take place. Crucially, there are two distinct forms of forensic neglect at play. First of all, the neglect displayed in the way this corner of the cemetery was abandoned at the mercy of the natural phenomena, whereby rain and mudslides made even counting

bodies impossible. Second, the majority of the individuals buried there have not been identified, not simply because of circumstances, but *by design*. For example, forensic professionals with experience in the identification of migrant bodies across Greece told me, in confidence, that the chain of evidence had been routinely broken. Authorities on the island have not followed the principle of retaining one file number across the 'life' of a body. Instead, two numbers have been in use: one issued by the police and another one by the pathologist's office. With no DNA samples, no proper map of the graves, and only poor records of each body, it becomes impossible to return to cases years, maybe even a decade, later.

## EVROS: INTO THE VIOLENT BORDERS

'Look, there's Edirne [in Turkey]. And there', my companion directs my gaze with his hand as we stand on top of a hill on a chilly February afternoon in 2020. 'There's Bulgaria. You'll want to take a picture of this intersection.' The Evros region in Western Thrace, encompassing roughly 4200 square kilometres, is named after the river Evros—Meriç in Turkish or Maritsa in Bulgarian—running along the border until it joins the Aegean Sea in the south. This area is where Greece shares its only land border with Turkey, but where it also meets Bulgaria, its northern neighbour. It is an area replete with long histories of forced displacement, from the 1923 population exchange with Turkey to being occupied by Germany's Bulgarian allies during the Second World War. Once Orthodox Greeks were a minority amongst minorities, but now make up the majority of residents in the prefecture. The north of the country is also home to much of Greece's Muslim population, amongst them the Turkish and the Pomaks, and

the Thracian Roma. In contrast to Lesvos, there are no tourists in this area mostly consisting of mountains, small villages and towns, and agricultural land. In winter it snows. During my stay, I constantly explained to inquiring locals that I was not from Frontex, the only northern European presence aside from journalists every now and then in this part of the country. As the site of the geographical location of the border, it is also here that bordering tactics take on their most intense form (Topak 2014). The area has always been heavily militarised, especially from 1974 onwards following the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. In the 2000s, however, a national threat other than Turkey was also produced at both the national and the European Union level: migrants (Grigoriadis and Dilek 2019). With the exception of locals with farmland in the area, no civilian is allowed to enter the border zone. Sometimes openly, sometimes secretly, the police surveil journalists and researchers in nearby towns. Arrests and harassment are commonplace.

A few days later, I am one floor below ground level at the pathologist's office in the regional capital. The middle-aged man who receives me has performed autopsies on all dead migrants in the Evros region in northern Greece registered by authorities in the past 20 years. On his shelves, there are old cases placed in folders at the top and at the bottom copying paper boxes full of the personal effects from the unidentified deceased. On his desk stand a computer, a printer, and two ashtrays. 'Before 2010', he tells me, 'it was always the same story: Kurds fleeing and young men leaving their homes to look for ways to provide for their families. After 2010, we began to see families, women, and children.' The causes of death have stayed the same, amongst them drowning in the Evros River, hypothermia, accidents, and medical conditions (Pavlidis and Karakasi 2019).

From 1974 until 2008, there were also thousands of M16A1 'bouncing' antipersonnel mines on an 11-km stretch of the border (Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor 2006; Pavlidis and Karakasi 2015), which claimed numerous migrant lives. The pathologist tells me of one case of violent death, a mother and her children murdered in an abandoned building, but my fieldwork experience tells me there might be more which were never identified as such, perhaps because of the stage of decomposition at which the bodies were when discovered—if the body was ever discovered. It is late February 2020 as we discuss the bodies and the work of a pathologist, and the pressure at the border is growing. Media is saturated with teargas-stained pictures of the border fence and of migrants throwing stones at masked police. Not long after our discussion it is revealed that a young man from Aleppo had been shot and killed by Greek border forces (see Forensic Architecture 2020b for details of the incident).

From talking to locals, it is obvious that migrants crossing the border have been a common sight in the region for some 30 years. So, too, have border deaths and disappearances. Alex, a man in his late 40s, remembers when he completed his military service in the region in the mid-1990s:

We were on a border patrol when the local farmers requested help. There was something blocking the water pump providing irrigation to the fields. It was a man, a refugee. He had drowned while trying to cross the river and then drifted right into the pump. Other times we would find a group of them huddled on an islet in the middle of the river. We would hand them over to the police, who would then begin to abuse them.

There are unnamed graves and pits around the region and all records prior to 2000 are unavailable. As in Lesbos—or anywhere in Greece—there were individuals who felt their duty was to do all they could to account for the disappeared and work towards identification. This included people like the pathologist who preserved box after box of personal effects in the hope that they would be useful later. But, systemic neglect was prevalent. It was not simply that people remained unidentified in Greece; they were actively non-identified.

## FORENSIC BORDERING

Other scholars have examined forensic science at the borders in the Mediterranean (M'charek 2018; M'charek and Black 2019) or the lack thereof (Kovras and Robins 2016). I have a slight different goal by invoking forensic *bordering*, since I concentrate on the longevity—and polymorphic quality—of borders, as well as on the aims of bordering practices. As I suggested earlier, the term 'bordering' essentially has two levels (see also Van Houtum 2021: 35–36). At one level, it draws out what states and bodies like the European Union do, including the laws they put forward, the treaties they sign, and the political, diplomatic, and military solutions they push. Put another way, it is how masses of people are categorised and how geographies are given their political meaning. At another level, bordering describes what happens when the laws, treaties, agreements, politics, and, indeed, intentions are put into practice. This includes how borders are observed and enforced, how spaces are divided and managed, and how bodies are marked. Forensic bordering also operates at these both levels. On the one hand, it manifests at the policy level—for example, what resources are allocated and where—on

the other hand, it is a set of practices. Crucially, it is border violence by other means. It is an aggregation of practices which reveal, draw, and inflict the border on the dead body of a migrant and establish a continuity between illegalisation and marginalisation in life and illegalisation and marginalisation in death. Put another way, Zahira Aragüete-Toribio (2022: 6) notes how the forensic methods can be perceived as a form of 'care' for the bodies, in stark contrast to the violence they met while they were still alive (see also M'charek and Black 2019). However, forensic bordering is the exact opposite in that it seeks to actively maintain—emotionally, symbolically, and physically—the violence of borders.

Thus I focus on the instantiation of such bordering in Greece. But, it is worth noting that, again, such practices also reflect broader European approaches—as well as their international acceptance and facilitation. As Greek border police and military have violently pushed migrants back, their cruelty has been legitimised and, indeed, concealed by the European Union's own agency, Frontex (e.g. Christides and Lüdke 2022). Similarly, forensic bordering reflects not simply the incompetence or malice of the Greek military, police, and forensic authorities. Forensic bordering also reflects a broader European trend of letting the migrant bodies piling up constitute, together with barbed wire and defence technologies, another border wall for the European Union border regime to use to deter further migration from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Often, migrants originate from the precise regions deprived and wrecked by European colonial aspirations and conquests of the past as well as the economic and military dominance of the present (see Laakkonen 2022: 2; Danewid 2017: 1679–1680; Hawthorne 2023).

## NON-IDENTIFYING THE 'OTHER'

At a minimum, the basic forensics in Greece are supposed to include an autopsy to determine the cause of death as well as—hopefully—characteristics such as age and—assumed—gender and DNA and tissue samples. In addition, an autopsy allows for cataloguing any identifying features, such as tattoos and scars. Often, some of this information may be either missing or hard to retrieve. The second form of enacting violence on migrant bodies takes place in morgues. Ninna Nyberg Sørensen and Laura Huttunen (2022: 322) note how, while biometric technologies are generally met with criticism and suspicion, forensic technologies for identification are embraced almost unanimously. Such technologies offer a chance for relatives to learn where their loved ones are and what happened to them. Furthermore, forensic technologies allow for the cause of death to be determined in the aftermath of mass violence, genocides, and enforced disappearances. There is an aura of veracity and accountability about them. However, Sørensen and Huttunen (2022: 333) also point out that, in the context of Mediterranean migrations, 'forensic analyses of the cause of death do not travel to courtrooms or political arenas where questions of accountability are debated and fought over'. In Greek border policies, it is precisely the denial of identification—and, indeed, accountability—which matters.

When von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, made the comparison to a shield in her address, she referred to, and enforced, a notion already present in the official state narrative in Greece. For example, the name 'Aspida' was given to a border enforcement operation in the Evros region as early as 2011. Forensic investigations in the aftermath of mass violence or enforced disappearances build on

interaction and cooperation between researchers and locals (Aragüete-Toribio 2022; Nyberg Sørensen and Huttunen 2022). But, since the premise of border violence and enforcement at the Greek borderlands is to prevent such local communities from being formed in the first place, such cooperation can hardly exist and can never build on an extensive everyday information base and historical knowledge. Similarly, if bones, and by extension dead bodies more generally, possess the ability to 'do things' with their 'emotive and affective potency' (Krmptich, Fontein and Harries 2010: 372–373), it is the precise goal of non-identifying practices, and forensic bordering more generally, to suppress such potentialities.

'Look, even if I'm one of them, I wouldn't trust most of the pathologists [with post-mortem examinations of migrants]. They're crazy. And nobody wants to do that work, anyway', a Greek forensic professional told me in Athens over a cup of coffee. They leaned forward over the table and went on to list all of the problems in the Aegean, island by island, and the mainland. They told me of situations where the forensic examinations were not even carried out by trained pathologists, but by other medical professionals. Of course, resources and professional incompetence or indifference played a role in the non-identification of migrants. However, what mattered even more was the hostile, and racist, anti-migration sentiment (see e.g. Dalakoglou 2013; Karamanidou and Kasperek 2022; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2018), which had by the time of my fieldwork become the official policy.

The Greek state ramped up its violence against migrants crossing the border, intensifying its pushbacks to Turkey and the brutalisation of migrants (Christides, Lüdke and Popp 2019; Christides et al. 2021; Christides et al. 2022; Forensic Architecture 2022; Karamanidou and

Kasperek 2022). As people on the move are forced to navigate increasingly dangerous routes and means for crossing to avoid such fates, the proportional share of border deaths vis-à-vis the total number of crossings has grown.<sup>7</sup> Many of these dead remain unknown for obvious reasons. For example, there are no DNA samples to compare and due to the condition of the body, sometimes even conscientious pathologists had very little with which to work. But, many remained unidentified for completely different reasons. They remained non-identified through the everyday procession of forensic bordering, the border wall erected from unknown bodies: contaminated DNA samples, undiscovered prostheses, and ignored violence. When examinations remained only superficial, very little information was recorded for each body—further diminishing the chances of an identification. At the same time, the push from either the European Union or Greek authorities to establish effective common protocols or increase the resources for the identification work done with migrant bodies has remained missing.

If families were looking for their relatives, they were left to do the legwork by themselves, visiting pathologists' offices or through informal middlemen. These middlemen were other migrants, sometimes from the same ethno-linguistic group who had lived in Greece longer, perhaps worked with NGOs, and skilled in navigating bureaucratic networks. One such middlemen I met was Ali, who had lived in Greece for a decade. He told me how he regularly received photographs from people whose family member had disappeared while crossing to Greece. With the photograph and other additional information, he would visit authorities and pathologists, hoping to find a trace or even be able to identify someone. He admitted this of course also took place outside

the formal legal recognition procedures, and forensic professionals noted to me that they would not consider a photograph alone to be a valid tool for identification. However, that was what people looking for answers had to rely on because, more often than not, the police or forensic authorities would do nothing on their own. Furthermore, denying families the possibility of a burial and mourning was not only a product of the anti-migration stance assumed by authorities, it was also one of its crucial vehicles: it enforced the 'otherness' of border-crossers past, present, and future, and made clear they were not worthy of being treated like fellow human beings.

## NOT CARING FOR THE DEAD

The third form of violence enacted on migrant bodies happens during the burial. That people must die unidentified as a direct result of border enforcement and anti-migration policies is a form of violence in itself. But, there is more to burials and cemeteries that warrant exploration. First, it is illustrative to turn to Greek burial traditions, which have several particular characteristics. A traditional practice, one that has survived until today especially in areas including Athens where a limited amount of land is available for burials, is that the dead are exhumed after around three to five years to make room for another burial. If the body has been properly skeletonised—a process which depends greatly on the type of soil available in the cemetery—at that time, the bones are moved to a box and transferred to an ossuary, a building specifically designated for their storage. If the skeletonisation is not complete, the remains are often moved to another plot at the cemetery to finish the process. Often, family members are present for the exhumation as they were during the initial burial. In the

classic ethnography of death rituals in rural Greece, Loring M. Danforth and photographer Alexander Tsiaras (1982) documented how much care is devoted to the dead in the village in which they carried out their research. From washing the bodies to tending to the bones, and to the detailed mourning practices, the dead are very much present, identified, and acknowledged. This relationship to the dead and to their bodies, though transformed over time into a less elaborate and dogmatic form, persists today.

What, then, happens to migrant bodies? Especially after the 2010 economic crash, my research participants explained that burying your dead has become somewhat of a luxury in certain parts of Greece. Or, as a forensic professional put it during one of our discussions over a beer, 'There are people who cannot afford to die.' Burial costs and cemetery plots are extremely expensive, especially in cities like Athens whereby often only fairly well-off Greek citizens can afford the large, elaborate white marble graves aboveground for which Greek cemeteries are known. During one of our discussions, I was told by another forensic professional that the morgue in Piraeus, Athens, had around a dozen unclaimed bodies every month because families could not afford to collect them. A walk in an Athenian cemetery will reveal graves beyond repair, with skulls exposed, bones barely covered by the cloth wraps they were buried in, and bones which have fallen to the grass after exhumation and during the transportation from graves to bone pits or the ossuary, all depending on the financial status of the bereaved. If the state has ignored its own poorest citizens in this way, what would it afford migrants, the outsiders, the often unwanted and uncared for?

The reason I began this part with a description of Greek burial traditions is because

they form a quite specific context in which migrant burials take place, but also because it highlights the discrepancy between how dead bodies 'ought to be' treated and how they actually are treated. First of all, migrant bodies, or bones, are exhumed the same way as any other remains would be, often with very little record kept of what happened to them afterwards. Exhumation is often a point after which, if it has not already, the 'migrant trail' goes cold. Furthermore, during my fieldwork, I encountered dead migrants who were never registered at the cemetery as well as those who were buried in the wrong grave. One such case involved an Iraqi man, whose remains had been misplaced and put in the grave of another person. This was a rare occurrence where the body was successfully identified, but even then his relatives would actually mourn at the grave of someone they did not know. I also visited mass graves, some even at cemeteries, where it would be impossible to tell who was laid there. I once accompanied a forensic professional to a cemetery to check on some graves of identified migrant bodies buried a few years prior. Once on site, we learned that there was no record of them in the cemetery registry.

In 2019, a forensic professional told me that they had so far mapped around 900 graves themselves, of which only around 40 per cent had a gravestone or a plaque. Moreover, even if a body was identified after burial, adding the name on the plaque would require a prosecutor's order and, thus, remained gated behind a hefty pile of paperwork. Another matter specific to migrant burials was the difficulty of determining the religion of the deceased, since this dictated if they should be buried in a Christian or an Islamic cemetery. Pathologists and religious leaders looked for a variety of determinants such as tattoos, signs of male circumcision, or personal effects, but such methods were

naturally unreliable and sometimes the bodies were in such a condition that such details were missing. Even with a well-preserved body, it was obvious that determining someone's religious affiliation from physical evidence alone was all but guesswork (see also Zagaria 2019: 27–28).

It is also worth noting that anti-migration policies not only affected the atmosphere or motivation of professionals and authorities, but also had quite tangible effects on the families and friends of disappeared migrants. As noted, there are strict requirements around entry and residence everywhere in Europe, and so it is in Greece as well. Given that the whole system is based on the idea that non-European, noncitizen, and, non-white migrants are not supposed to come in the first place, let alone stay in the country, it is extremely difficult for those without a visa, residence permit, or citizenship to even come looking for their missing loved ones.<sup>8</sup> In many cases, it required a similar, potentially fatal journey, one on which those already disappeared had risked their lives. Even if those left behind had safely arrived in Greece, chances were that arrival occurred years after the disappearance. This made finding people, or even the right grave, highly unlikely.

There is, however, a crucial difference between the neglect faced by even the poorest Greek citizens and dead migrants: only the former will invoke moral outrage. For example, with the COVID-19 pandemic, cemeteries were filling up quickly, which provoked debates about death, dignity, and duty (see e.g. THETOC 2020). Such debates regarding migrant deaths and burials never seemed to occur during my fieldwork. No one is monitoring or protesting against the indifferent burials of migrants or their bodies' maltreatment at the hands of authorities. Even if Christian eschatology, and even more so, Orthodox Christian eschatology, is concerned with respect towards and the

preservation of the body, I learnt that such considerations depend entirely on the personal conviction of the pathologists and other authorities. A superficial examination followed by a hasty burial was generally the standard.

## CONCLUSIONS

When analysing Mediterranean migration and border enforcement, Maurizio Albahari (2015) invoked the notion of 'crimes of peace' (see also Scheper-Hughes 1997) to account for the 'ambitious, laborious, and resilient administrative, political, and ideological work of maintaining a "system" that has proven crumbling and volatile and that *keeps proving* unjust, violent, and unequal' (Albahari 2015: 21, emphasis in the original). In short, the very acts of supposedly fighting 'criminality' and 'illegality' in migration become crimes themselves. Violence against migrant bodies, both alive and dead, at the Greek borderlands is also structural in the sense that it conceals and rejects accountability, but equally very much an active practice with visible perpetrators: the police, the military, the politicians, and so forth.

In the context of Lesvos, Sarah Green (2010: 269) noted that once the bodies have washed ashore in Greece, they will not leave the country. Unlike living human beings, the dead cannot be assaulted and pushed to the river or forced on inflatable rafts and towed to Turkish territorial waters. They must be buried on Greek soil. Even today, the repatriations of identified migrant bodies remain rare. This fact is, first and foremost, behind the practices I have identified as forensic bordering in Greece. The dead go unnamed, and the disappearances are not followed up. Such practices, or the lack thereof, are intimately connected to the wider border regime and the anti-migration politics currently prevalent not just in Greece, but across

Europe. These policies seem to be built on the premise that migrants crossing into Greece in a bid to reach refuge in the European Union were not only a national threat, as the continuing references to Greece as a ‘shield’ suggest. But, there was also the notion that those attempting to cross were not equal human beings in the first place. This dehumanisation manifested in how structures—or the absence of structures—ensured that not just un-identification, but *non-identification* prevailed, as well as by the way the families of the disappeared were left without answers even when they looked for some. Unlike in the Tunisian case explored by Valentina Zagaria (2019; 2020), the forensic technology required would be available, but it simply was not extended to migrant deaths. Migrant deaths were relegated to a sphere of their own—one of hostility and disdain.

Acts towards preserving dead migrants’ dignity or attesting to their humanity in the Mediterranean context have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Perl 2018; Zagaria 2019; 2020). My intention here has in no way been to suggest that such practices would not exist in Greece at all. Neither am I suggesting that various forms of solidarity, as evidenced by, for example, the building squats in Athens by grassroots actors together with refugees, would not exist. Rather, by focusing on forensic bordering, I have pointed out that such acts, when they take place, would go against the grain, potentially met with hostility. Through disappearances, non-identification, and the denial of answers, the Greek border regime, with complicity from the European Union, enforced the notion that entering Europe would not keep migrants safe—not in life and not in death.

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## NOTES

- 1 Various definitions exist, such as ‘refugees’, ‘migrants’, ‘refugees and migrants’, and ‘refugees/migrants’. I have opted to use ‘migrant’ in its most inclusive sense, encompassing all people on the move in need of refuge from properly recognised, protracted, low-intensity conflicts and dispossession driven by capitalist accumulation, colonial extraction, and unequal global relations. In short, when I write ‘migrants’, I also mean ‘refugees’.
- 2 The notion of not equal human being has also been previously analysed. For example, Nick Vaughan-Williams (2015) explored the use of animalised metaphors used in relation to migration, as well as spaces like refugee camps as zoo-like, with migrants in cages, yet fully exposed to the outside gaze.
- 3 ‘Border violence’ encompasses various forms of violence directed at people on the move, many of which will be explored later in this article. For a catalogue, see Border Violence Monitoring Network (2023b).



- 4 Elisabeth Kirtsoglou and Giorgos Tsimouris (2018) discuss how racism and xenophobia in Greece exemplify the distinction between ‘us Greeks’ and ‘them Muslims’, and associate migrants with criminality and rejection of European values, on the one hand, but also with displacement of the ‘original’ Greek inhabitants, on the other. Furthermore, Lena Karamanidou (2016: 2004) notes that violence against migrants, by both state and non-state actors, has been portrayed in Greece, together with being ‘isolated events’, as understandable reactions to migration’s threat, as well as the denial of such violence’s racialised nature by referring to Greece’s European values (ibid.: 2012).
- 5 It is true, as Sarah Green (2013) argues, that the borders, even territories, of Europe have shifted over time. However, and no matter how much this has also shifted, Europe has always readily defined those who do not belong to its political, economic, and cultural sphere. Dimitris Dalakoglou (2016) has noted how borders and border enforcement have a distinct dual role in present day Europe: first of all, he points out how they represent a steady—and growing—spatial point of reference in the post-2008 world marked by insecurities, for example, regarding real estate and housing and, second, they act as a gateway to becoming European to Europe’s former ‘others’. Thus, by enforcing their borders, former seemingly ‘peripheral’ Eastern European countries have been able to move closer to the ‘core’ of (Western) Europe.
- 6 For the scale and impact of crossings to Lesbos in 2015 and 2016, see Evthymios Papataxiarchis (2016a; 2016b) and Katerina Rozakou (2017).
- 7 This has been a growing trend over the past few years. See, for example, <https://www.unhcr.org/desperatejourneys/>.
- 8 Greece has often had low recognition rates for asylum applications (see e.g. Karamanidou and Schuster 2012; Timothy Hatton 2021) and few routes for the regularisation of a stay (see Dalakoglou 2012 for some notes on recent history).

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