

## Tailors

Economic and social changes in the region of the Northeastern Aegean in mid 19th c. bring about changes in people's habits, dress standards and manners. Economic prosperity allows clothing made to measure by specialized craftsmen, beyond domestic production that had for centuries been the handiwork of women weaving on household looms.

There used to be quite a few tailors in Lesvos further specializing into, among others, *fragoraftes*, making exclusively "west-inspired" garments and *abatzides*, fashioning "abades", thick-woven, felt overcoats, typical of the Ottoman era.

Dozens of tailoring shops, mainly in the town of Mytilene were also meeting points, informal cafés, bristling with political conversation and exchange of local news. Most tailors in Lesvos were of Asia Minor origin.

Novice tailors were instructed the craft as underlings (*tsirakia*) to accomplished craftsmen and went on to either becoming the latter's associates or raising their sights and setting up their own business.



Tailor in Agiassos

## Cutlers

"A *meraklis* (a man who loves all things beautiful) is given away by the knife adorning his belt." Besides "meraklides", there were the diligent: those who needed saws, pocket-knives, shears, "gatzopriona" (olive tree saws) to work in their fields and households. Cutlers toured around the villages selling their ware. They were not organized in a guild; the knife did not allow for tie-ups.

A great number of them were made to order with the name of the customer engraved on them and the crier announcing its delivery in the square.

The manufacturing of knives required repeated switching from the furnace where steel was heated to the grinder where it was ground and back again until the desired sharpness of the blade's edge had been achieved. Lastly, the blade was dipped into cold water to be tempered.

The handles were made of horn or olive wood and were engraved with patterns.

The furnace of the last cutler on the island is still burning hot in Agiassos.



Last cutler in Agiassos



## Shipbuilders

Seafarers for centuries, at times sea masters, the Greeks were adept builders of wooden vessels.

Lesvos was one of the islands where wooden hulls were constructed and repaired: boats, barges, jiggers, single-sail workboats (*tsernikia*), cargo ships (*peramata*), light fast sailing-boats (*trehandiria*), small oared vessels (*bougiadedes*)...

Mytilene, Plomari, Polychnito, Parakoila, Skala Loutron, Koundouroudia, Perama and Panagiouda were the locations of the most important shipyards in the early 20th c.

Mainly pine and more rarely cypress wood was used for their construction. The building of the vessel entailed designing it, constructing the frame, side planking, adjusting the wheelhouse, the wheel and the mast, waterproofing and painting.

Shipyards were in operation until approximately 1950. Due to the massive building of ships with metal or plastic hulls and the shrinking of the fishing fleets, they were left in disuse.

Today in Lesvos a handful of remaining shipbuilders keep on struggling with the wood and the sea. You can meet them in Plomari, in Skala Kallonis, in Skala Loutron, in Mytilene, in Panagiouda and in Molyvos.



Shipyards in Skala Kallonis



Pitchers in the potters' settlement in Mandamados

## Weavers

From the Homeric Penelope to the women of the early 20th c., queens, princesses, noble ladies and peasant women alike had their own, small or large, loom in their house.

A pillar of creativity and economy in every household.

From the toddler's christening gown to the deceased's white shroud, everything passed through the warp and weft of the loom. Bed covers, clothes, footwear, colourful rugs, kilims and feedbags (*torvades*).

Every so often, textiles woven by the lady of the house were sold to procure additional income for the family. The payment was often made solely in barter.

The heddles, the reeds, the treadles, the stretcher, the ratchet and, quite often, the very production of the threads were part of a woman's everyday life. A tough and laborious blessing...

Today, in Agia Paraskevi, in Agiassos, in Assomato and in Parakila, the very few remaining weavers keep folk traditions alive weaving intricate patterns with a hankering for beauty.



Weaver in Agiassos

## Potters - Charcoal makers

Potters in Lesvos, as finds in the prehistoric settlement of Thermi testify, claim a presence of 5000 years. They are also known as "ts(ou)kalades" or "k(ou)marades", meaning makers of cruses, that is, earthenware pots (*k'maria*).

Marmites, beakers, cups, plates (*testa*) for serving food; bigger (*koumaria*) and smaller (*tsirokoumara*) cruses, pitchers, containers for storing oil or cheese and for carrying water (*koutrouwia*), jars for precious oil as well as roof tiles, bricks, bee smokers (*thymiata*), clay flutes and goblet drums (*toubelekia*), for times of feasting. They were often decorated with vegetal patterns and representations of everyday life.

The art was passed down from father to son, while *esnaphia*, local guilds, protected their members' interests. Major pottery-producing sites were Mandamados and Agiassos. The artisans were so adept that their craft travelled across the vast market of the Ottoman Empire. Their art has faded but is not yet gone. In Mandamados, where an annual pottery festival is held in August, namely in Agios Stephanos, a small potters' settlement featuring the island's trademark kilns, in Agiassos, in Molyvos as well as in downtown Mytilene, there are worthy successors to the old artisans.

## Traditional olive oil mill workers

Archaic olive oil mills made of two millstones were ubiquitous in the Mediterranean until the 19th c. In Lesvos, a leader in industrialization, they were soon to be replaced by steam-powered oil presses which skyrocketed olive oil production. Central and northeastern Lesvos was teeming with oil mills, private or cooperative-owned, with the regions of Gera, Plomari, Agiassos and Mandamados in prominent position.

A buzzing swarm of workers toiled away to extract precious olive oil. Carters (*arabatzides*) and porters (*hamalides*) who carried the sackfuls of olives and poisers (*kandartzides*) who weighed them; stone workers who operated the crushers (grinding mills) and tiers who filled the olive sheets (*tsoupia*) with olive pomace; *baskitzides* who piled up the olive sheets and *karsinoi* who assisted them - a human chain dating back to the antiquity and breaking off as late as in the 20th c. with the advent of electricity and the need for working hands reduced to machinery surveillance.

The two Olive Oil Museums of the island located in Agia Paraskevi and in Papados, Gera, brilliantly put together snapshots of those people's everyday lives.

## Wood carvers

A chunk of walnut or chestnut wood, coupled with patience, persistence and commitment to beauty, was shaped into wood-carved iconostases, prelatie thrones or ornately decorated *Epitaphios* sepulchers. Likewise, it was transformed into trousseaux trunks, dining room sets and comfortable armchairs in bourgeois households, chests of drawers in newlyweds' bedrooms and flamboyant mirrors in spacious mansion lobbies.

Initially, it was the best carpenters and saddle makers (*sagmatopoi*) who carved the wooden part of the saddle. Next to them came craftsmen from Ioannina (or, according to different testimony, Asia Minor) who constructed the iconostasis of the Temple of Virgin Mary in Agiassos in the early 19th c, leading to the establishment and flourishing of the art of wood carving on the island.

Vegetal patterns, birds, outlines of churches, Byzantine double-headed eagles, vibrant views of the artisans' everyday life and context, were chisel-carved on their handicrafts.

Imaginative and exceptionally talented, though few, the wood carvers of Lesvos keep their tools busy in Agiassos, in Assomatos and in Eftalou.



Wood carver in Agiassos

## Interior artists

The wealth accumulated on the island in the middle of the 19th c. was architecturally expressed in lavish mansions, exquisite examples of neoclassical style with distinctive Northern European elements.

In those mansions, mostly unknown artists gifted with their love of beauty and motivated by the quest for the daily bread reshaped the baroque western elements to murals paying homage to the ultramarine of the Aegean and the ochre of the sunrise.

The demands of the space and the owner's pocketbook dictated the expansion and the patterning.

Their materials and tools were almost identical with those of other painters, namely, fish glue, powder paints, oil paints for "framed" themes, water, brushes, a ladder, string, hey, tow or goat-hair for repairing the mortar and containers for the paints.

In post-war years, this decorative practice fell in decline.

Today you can see outstanding samples of their work in the island's mansions, which either remain in the hands of private owners or have been converted into small hotels or house public services.



Photo from the Oil Museum - Vranas Oil Mill in Papados, Gera

## Millers

A central figure in fairy tales and in constant dispute with the goblins, the miller and his mill were a standing institution of every community. Almost all villages and towns in Lesvos boasted at least one flour mill. In windy coastal areas, there were windmills and in the mainland, by the rivers, water mills. When circumstances required, watermills were built one below the other on a mountainside to take turns utilizing the invaluable running water.

Millers weren't usually paid in cash, but "were given right", that is, they would withhold 5 to 10 percent of the ground flour.

In the mill, there was always makeshift housekeeping with a couple of beddings for the miller to rest, while around the mill every hardworking miller would put precious water to good use growing prolific gardens. If he was truly diligent he would keep hens, pigs, rabbits, even bees.

Visitors can admire a multitude of now disused flour mills scattered all across the island. Standing out among them are the windmill of Perama in Gera, the watermills in the Ligona Valley and in Kato Myloi, off Skalochori, and a still operative mill in Lisvori.



Mural in a house in Molyvos

## Salt pond workers

"With divine salt he sprinkled ...," thus sang Homer marking the significance of salt in his days.

On the blessed island of Lesvos, there are two salt ponds, one in the Gulf of Kalloni and another in Skala Polychnitou. Work in the salt ponds would begin in April or May and the collection of the salt wouldn't be completed until the rainy season in September. The agricultural population of the region made up the workforce of the salt ponds.

Workers in charge of the water supply (*lavoutistades*), salt collectors and caique boat steersmen, earned their wages labouring away beside the salt mountains. From the drawing of water with a type of water mill (*kouwadakia*) to the digging with a (*g-kasmas*, that is, a pickaxe (as salt forms aggregates tending to harden); from the loading of the wagons, to the cleaning and the sea transport; first by boat and then by ship - salt travelled across regions never to be seen by its workers. It would enter kitchens to season meals and preserve food provisions.

Today, almost all production stages have become mechanized and a handful of seasonal staff fills in during peak time.



## Tanners - Tabakides

Tanners or *tabakides* picked up shiploads of rawhides from Africa or Western Europe and converted them into soft, ravishing, sumptuous materials.

Tanneries were set up in Lesvos at the end of the 19th c., with the largest of them located in Mytilene on the site of "Tabakika" in the northern port, in Plomari and In Perama, Gera, where in the early 19th c. one of the largest tannery in the Balkan area was set up.

All treatment phases went through the tanners' hands: successive sessions of soaking, hair removal in vats, degreasing, immersion into pine and oak extracts, compressing, drenching in fish oils, stretching, dyeing, drying, pressing on the rollers and, finally, stamping with the company's brand name and packing of the valuable leather.

Tanneries' decline continued well into the post-war years. In 1990 the last mighty tannery in Perama, Gera, ceased its operation. Today, the derelict buildings stand both as valuable testimony of the industrial history of Greece and ideal sites for a voyage back into time.

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Action responsible: Anastasios M. Perimenis, ETAL S.A.

Edited by - Texts: Despina Papadima

Design - Layout: E. Konstantinou

Photographs: Perikles Merakos

Translation: Vaso Pappi

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