

# Greek Folk Textiles



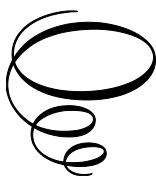
# Greek Folk Textiles:

*Customs, Symbolism, Narrative*

By

Johannis Tsoumas

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Greek Folk Textiles: Customs, Symbolism, Narrative

By Johannis Tsoumas

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## INTRODUCTION

*'I gathered all the stars and the golden moon  
and spread them on my loom and on my weaving.  
The turning of the spindle and the beating of the loom reed  
will bring birds of the forest and gulls of the sea.'*

(Extract from a traditional folk song of Agrafta, Evrytania, Central Greece)

Textiles represent the culmination of a wide range of arts and crafts—including weaving, embroidery, sewing, knitting, and even fine arts—and vividly reflect the living reality of humanity's evolution throughout its centuries-long journey through time. The search for the relationship of textiles with their evolutionary path throughout the world sheds light on previously unknown aspects of history. Through unearthed textile finds, but also other tangible and intangible sources of information such as ceramics, glass, metalwork, painting, but also literature and oral history, many of the fundamental social principles, rules, habits, customs, and even needs of world cultures are recorded and researched. Over time, textiles began to form a common language for interpreting human socio-cultural behavior, regardless of peoples' geographical, ethnographic, religious or cultural differences. Even today, they constitute essential elements of our everyday life as they include not only the clothes we wear and at the same time certify our social, economic and cultural identity, but also the household textiles for use or decoration, the ecclesiastical and religious textiles, the textiles for sports, the army, work, in short, for everything related to the Western way of life. Textiles are found everywhere, being fundamental guardians of the memory of our existence, and constitute in themselves an important field of material culture in which the principles of functionality and aesthetics are uniquely combined. Although often underestimated and unseen, most of the time they constitute or contain symbols and allegories with strong messages that keep the memory of tradition and folk culture intact in the individual and collective consciousness.

This research is an introduction to the period of great structural changes in Greek cultural history of the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century and reflects almost its entire development up to the early decades of the twentieth century. Already, in this work, a significant

bibliography, often difficult to find, as well as a very large number of sources of information which have been prioritized and evaluated in a rigorous and accessible program of structure and organization, have been gathered. With its systematic and analytical approach, as well as its critical information, the work contributes not only to the limited international bibliography on this subject, but also to recognizing the specificity and symbolic nature of decorative arts in relation to textiles. This is another component of the work with an emphasis on the ideas of functionality, techniques, materials, customs and traditions, but also on symbolism, allegories and narratives as axes upon which the synthesis of modern Greek culture in the twentieth century was based.

The first chapter of the book, titled 'Traditional weaving and the art of the loom', investigates and comments on the basic tools, materials, devices and mechanisms of traditional weaving in ancient Greece, as well as the symbolism that distinguishes the textiles themselves as well as the customs of the era. This constitutes an extremely important basis for the research, commentary and interpretation of the art of weaving in the Greek tradition, as it is directly linked to the Byzantine and post-Byzantine era culture and art, providing important information on the use of tools, techniques, but also the different types of weaving that were created in various regions of mainland and island Greece in recent centuries.

In the second chapter 'Embroidery: patterns and symbolism' the author attempts to investigate in a thorough and at the same time substantial way the seemingly simple and beautiful, but essentially difficult, complex and highly aesthetic art of embroidery in the Greek folk tradition. Trying to connect this high art with the traditional embroidery practices in Byzantium, the author dives into the sometimes all-white and sometimes colorful world of embroidery, revealing traditional techniques and methods, materials, motifs, themes, symbols, folkways, mores and customs that are directly linked to embroidery in various parts of Greece and Cyprus. He also attempts to shed light on the categories of embroidery that were created according to their destination and purpose, namely embroidery for personal use, such as uniforms and other types of clothing, and embroidery for the home, focusing on the respective symbolism and their narratives as interpretation means of the history of the Greek tradition.

In the third chapter entitled 'The sociocultural language of the Greek traditional costume', the concept of Greek traditional costume is examined in various parts of the country, such as Macedonia, Thrace, Central Greece, but also the Aegean islands with particular emphasis on Crete and the Dodecanese. The way the costumes were made, as well as their various

types depending on gender and the social and cultural conditions of each place, are examined in detail. Specific clothing terms, as well as parts of the costumes which vary from region to region, are also commented on and analyzed. Particular reference is made to the symbolism and narrative elements of the costumes which usually reflected the social status, but also the various significant events in the lives of the wearers.

The fourth chapter, entitled 'Religious textiles and their meaning', explores the significant influence of both religious and secular clothing in the various phases of the Byzantine Empire on the formation of the numerous types of liturgical vestments of Greek Orthodox Christianity in the centuries that followed until today. Specifically, special reference is made to the holy vestments of the three most important degrees of the clergy, as well as to the method of their manufacture, mainly with regard to the art of gold embroidery. The most important liturgical and decorative veils used to protect several holy objects or decorate parts of the temple are also mentioned and analyzed. However, more important than all of this is considered the revelation of the particularly notable concepts, allegories and symbolisms that characterize all religious textiles, with regard to their materials, colors, the method of their decoration with gold embroidered themes taken from the Bible, and consequently their use.

The fifth chapter 'Washing clothes and household textiles' constitutes a separate section of this research, as it focuses on the various traditional ways of washing textiles during the previous centuries. Specifically, the author attempts a connection between the ways of washing clothing and household textiles in antiquity, with the washing methods of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mainly in the small villages and towns of the country, with a brief reference to the large urban centers. Of interest are the explanations and analyses of terms, habits, traditional objects and devices, cleaning materials used, as well as the excerpts of interviews with people who still remember the rituals of washing according to the customs and traditions of each place.

In the sixth chapter, with the general title 'Sewing and knitting', the author attempts to crystallize the practices that are less well-known than those mentioned up to this point, specifically the art of tailoring and knitting. The concepts of tailoring and dressmaking begin to be clarified, the importance of the sewing machine in the professional or personal process of sewing is highlighted, while the significance of mass production of fabrics through the country's large industries in the late and especially the early twentieth century is also underlined. The very characteristic role of the typical seamstress, a profession that excelled in the urban environment of the twentieth century, is commented on in depth,

while special reference is made to knitting as a traditional female occupation both in the provincial and urban environment. The contribution of interviews with ordinary women is also significant in this chapter.

Of particular interest is the seventh and final chapter of the book, titled 'Textiles and other stories', as it comprises an attempt by the author to connect all the information obtained from the previous six chapters with other forms of traditional intangible, oral art and culture such as folk literature and wisdom, as well as traditional folk songs. Specifically, the symbolism and allegories of weaving and embroidering in Greek folk fairy tales which constitute one of the most important ways of disseminating and preserving Greek traditional oral history, many of which have already been recorded by specialist folklorists and historians, are commented on and interpreted. Textiles in a rather unexplored area of Greek oral tradition such as in proverbs and riddles are also investigated. This subchapter in particular presented special difficulty in terms of translation and accurate rendering of the meanings of both categories, although the author used a special methodology in terms of their more accurate rendering (proverb or riddle in Greek, romanization, translation, context of usage). The same methodology was also applied to the interpretation of the rare folk songs that were selected, which are related to the art of textiles and reflect the customs, traditions and habits of the female weavers and embroiderers of the time.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# CHAPTER 1

## TRADITIONAL WEAVING AND THE ART OF THE LOOM

### **1a) The tradition of weaving art in ancient Greece**

Weaving is one of the first arts in human history. The findings of several excavations lead us to the conclusion that weaving has been known since prehistoric times in all cultures of the Mediterranean, Central Asia, India and the Far East. In Greece and in many Asian countries in the textile art, as a primary raw material, wool was used and less flax, one of the oldest fibrous plants, used mainly in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> According to Herodotus, wool was considered an impure and energetically impure material by the Egyptian priests who had to dress only in white, linen clothes, just like the dead. In China silk was used, while in India and all southern Asia cotton and other plant fibers such as hemp, jute and sedge were broadly used. Much later when the exchange of goods between countries began, raw materials were subsequently adopted by other cultures as well.

In Greece, the history of weaving began in the Neolithic era. The basic textile fibers were plant-based fibers such as cotton, flax, and sedge, as well as animal fibers like silk and especially wool which was an important by-product of the intensive animal husbandry activity. The rearing and shearing of goats and sheep was then an exclusively male job, while the so-called *tallasyugria*, i.e. all tasks from washing wool to producing yarn, were performed by women.

In the Minoan times, the weaving workshops were supplied with the raw material for their work from the numerous goat and sheep herds of the island. However, a separate category of textiles was the delicate cobweb fabrics as depicted in Minoan frescoes of Crete.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, in the Cycladic culture and specifically in the area of Thera, we cannot speak with certainty about the correspondingly extensive use of wool, as the island was too small to support so many herds of sheep and goats. However, according to archaeological findings, the textile production of the Akrotiri region was quite active mainly in terms of linen and papyrus weavings and

less in woven wool, a fact which testifies to the trade transactions of the islanders with Egyptian merchants.

In classical times, weaving was for the ancient Athenians the only decent occupation for the upper social class women. There was even a custom of hanging a tuft of wool outside the house where a girl was born, which was a symbol of the high level of domestic culture of each family. Garments such as the men's linen *chiton*, that is a shoulder-fastened tunic, the *peplos*, a type of veil woven by girls of the aristocracy and offered in special processions to cult statues of deities, at festivals of Hera in Ilia and Athena in Athens during the Panathenaia,<sup>3</sup> several types of simple everyday clothing such as the *himation*, a type of today's overcoat and the *chlamys*, an ancient type of cloak, but also military clothing, bedclothes, quilts, kilims, etc., were also woven. Although it started as a domestic occupation, weaving soon passed to the level of crafts, in which slaves and free workers headed by the so-called *hisonarches*, or else head weavers, worked together. Not much later, the guilds of dyers and weavers appeared.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, however, the art of weaving was difficult, time-consuming and laborious, and the number of garments and other woven items produced was small to meet the great needs of the ancient Greeks. That is why it is obvious that its importance during the classical era was non-negotiable. Therefore, it must be emphasized that the number of archaeological textiles that have come to light in Greece is not very large and there are also many reasons that explain this situation. The main one is the sensitivity of the raw materials linked to the climate of the country which did not favor their preservation over time.<sup>5</sup> However, valuable information about the textile art in Greek antiquity can also be derived from several forms of art such as sculpture and especially pottery, through the scenes depicted on various types of vases, as well as literature, through the great texts of ancient Greek playwrights and Homer's epics.

One of the most important weaving tools was the spindle, known as early as the seventh millennium, which consisted of its main elongated cylindrical body, usually of wood, around which the spun thread was wound. At its base was the so-called whorl which was a usually round, ceramic or stone object, in a wide variety of weights, sizes and diameters, which served in the spinning process by enhancing the rotational movement of the spindle caused by the fingers of the spinner.<sup>6</sup>

The distaff or *helacate* in ancient Greek was a tool with a characteristic fork to fasten the wool or flax fibers that were to be turned into threads. It was generally a simple, functional tool, sometimes decorated with ivory or gold and was used with the spindle and the whorl. To keep it stable during



spinning, its lower end was attached to the spinner's belt or inside a special basket. Thus, as the spindle rotated the fibers were twisted and the thread was produced.<sup>7</sup> According to mythology, in addition to humans, the *helacate* was used by all three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos who would determine the fate of each newborn by spinning, measuring and finally cutting the thread of their life and destiny.<sup>8</sup>

According to Homer, many times the female spinner, also known as *gnestra*, did not use a spindle, but twisted the wool or flax fibers with her hand.<sup>9</sup> The same is mentioned in Euripides's tragedy *Orestes* in which the women would spin the linen thread by hand without the use of any tools.<sup>10</sup>

The warp-weighted loom was perhaps the most important weaving device in ancient times and was directly linked to domestic life and economy, as, according to mythology, it was invented by the goddess Athena, patroness of handicrafts and fine arts. According to Kakridis, the goddess Athena was the one who first wove clothes to attire the goddess Hera, but also Pandora, the first mortal woman who, according to Hesiod, transferred the art of weaving to mortals.<sup>11</sup> Generally as the most important weaving mechanism, the loom covered all the needs for clothing, but also for more complex aesthetically and technically textile creations such as colorful kilims and carpets which often became objects of commercial transactions. Due to the value of its usability, it was used and preserved as a traditional manual weaving machine until the end of antiquity, despite all the difficulties it had in its use such as the heavy weight of its parts which caused great fatigue to the users.

In addition to being necessary, the art of weaving was also loved during the Trojan War, as even queens spent much of their time in front of the loom, even though they had to work standing up, as the looms were then vertical and not horizontal like the ones we know today. Valuable historical references to clothing and the production of textiles by women are made in Homer's epics and especially in the *Odyssey* (ε' and ζ' rhapsody) in which Penelope, while waiting for Odysseus, spent her time in front of the loom, weaving and spinning at the same time the fabrics for to trick the suitors in this way, thus gaining time for Odysseus' return. It is clear that Penelope did not weave out of necessity, but out of love both for her husband Odysseus whose return to Ithaca she always expected, but also for the art of weaving itself. In the Homeric text the suitors do not seem to be surprised when Penelope tells them that she must finish her weaving and then decide who she will choose as a husband, as at that time it was considered normal for a queen to weave.<sup>12</sup> In the text it also appears that her son Telemachus is the one who urges her to continue her occupation of weaving, in her attempt to avoid suitors, by telling her:

*Get in and look at your house and your household,  
your helakate, the loom and order the slaves to work for you,  
and leave these words to men,  
especially to me, as I am also the master of the house'.<sup>13</sup>*

In the *Iliad* Hector's wife Andromache, Helen of Troy and in the *Odyssey* the sorceress and goddess Circe were also skilled weavers, emphasizing that the art of weaving was connected to important figures of sacred mythology for the ancient Greeks. In particular, Circe's song to Odysseus and his companions '*Strike my shuttle, strike my golden reed*' testifies to this strong connection between weaving and the cultural identity of women of that time.<sup>14</sup>

The weaving art flourished in Cyprus as well, as can be seen from various reports. Cypriot weavers used a wide variety of raw materials for weaving, such as fibers of flax, which was systematically cultivated on the island, animal wool, silk, and cotton. Although most raw materials were produced locally in Cyprus, there are indications that some of them, such as cotton, were massively imported from Egypt, the largest cotton-producing country in the ancient world. However, the professional weavers were men, organized into guilds according to the raw materials they used and the types of textiles they produced.<sup>15</sup>

During the 'Golden Age' of Pericles, when the arts reached their peak, two Cypriot weavers, Akessas and his son Helicon, who lived in Athens at the time, were particularly distinguished. As it is apparent from references in the texts of ancient authors such as Athenaeus, Zenobius and Eustathius, both were particularly talented as they were gifted by the goddess Athena with the exquisite grace of the weaving art. This is why they undertook to weave the famous veil of her chryselephantine statue the during Panathenaia festival. According to Athenios, both of these weavers had already had a long tradition of high weaving art in their native city of Salamina, Cyprus, which is why their work was also so highly valued in Greece.<sup>16</sup> The dyeing of yarns was a special process that required very high skill from specific professionals called *anthovafoi* ('flower dyers') because many dyes came from plants. The process was executed in workshops, the so-called *pharmakones*, due to the high toxicity of the dyes. Most of them were located far from the center of the cities because the dyeing work was dangerous for their residents, mainly due to the intense fumes produced. As already mentioned, many dyes came from vegetable, but also from animal pigments, with the best known and most valuable being porphúra, which gave an indelible deep purple-red color and was extracted from a group of rare sea snail shells. Its production was extremely laborious and required a large number of shells to produce just a small quantity, this is

why it was considered a noble, rare color already before becoming a symbol of gods and kings. For example, from twelve thousand shells, only a few grams of porphúra came out, which was enough to dye only the circumference of a garment.<sup>17</sup>

Saffron or crocus was another dye that gave a nice yellow color. From it came the so-called croc-dyed textiles or croc-fabrics, while madder was an important plant from the root of which a deep red pigment was produced. The production of the blue color in various tones came from the indigo pigment which came from India, specifically from the indigenous plant *Indigofera Tinctoria*, from which it got its name. Indigo had the property to indelibly dye all textile materials, animal or vegetable, and indeed without any further preparation of the thread.<sup>18</sup> Other pigments were *coccus*, which came from the eggs of the female *Coccus ilicis* insects and gave a red color, *kikis* which was extracted from the bark of the oak tree which produced a black pigment and sulfur which produced dyes of various shades.<sup>19</sup>

## 1b) Narratives and symbolism

Although the information about textiles in Greek antiquity in relation to other forms of applied arts was limited, we can claim that they were important carriers of concepts beyond their final form and function as clothing, household items, elite regalia, trade, exchange items and other uses. Their narrative value was fundamental since in many cases they were riddled with symbols of all forms of authority, power, mystery, joy, mourning, but also with symbols of fate and the cycle of life. The various techniques of weaving, the threads and their rich varieties, the colors, the embroidered patterns and the painted motifs, objects, and figures were important elements in interpreting the narrative qualities of fabrics and garments or other textile products.<sup>20</sup>

It must be emphasized that during the classical period the appearance and aesthetics of textiles were determined more by decoration techniques than weaving. These included embroidery, tapisserie, painting and decoration with complementary weft.<sup>21</sup> A typical case is a finding in a burial mound of the Crimean peninsula, which is the remains of an ancient Greek woolen cloth draped over a wooden sarcophagus. The cloth was painted in black, red and brown and depicted scenes of warriors, women running to save themselves, chariots and also some Greek lettering. The names Niki, Iocasta, Athena and Phaidra can be easily detected on it. According to von Hofsten, this piece of cloth constituted ‘a wall hanging, perhaps an imitation of a more expensive woven tapestry, before being used as a pal (fu-

*nerary cloth*)!'.<sup>22</sup> Here a war scene is figuratively rendered which seems to reflect the expansionist military policy of the ancient Greeks in areas beyond the borders of the Greek territory. This scene narrates the military power of the Greek conquerors who, protected by the gods, had not only to keep it in their memory, but also, to impress visitors to the location of this wall hanging and therefore the Greek indisputable supremacy in the Crimea area. Generally speaking, animals, plants, and depictions of human or god figures on clothing were typical examples of narrative expression, each of which related to wearers themselves, to worship of nature and the gods, or to important historical and warlike events, and occasionally served as talismans against misfortune.

The colors and dyes of the fabrics in general had the power to project the habits, qualities, but also the social class of wearers, as their symbolism varied depending on the period and city, some-times contradicted one another. In Sparta during classical times, colorful fabrics were used to make garments worn only by courtesans. That is, automatically, this type of clothing provided the information of the specific status of the women who wore them, separating them from the rest of ordinary women. In Vravrona, on the other hand, gay women as well as effeminate men used to wear crocus-colored robes, whereas in other societies this type of clothing was worn by wealthy and pregnant women, as crocus was thought to help with childbirth and cramps. The porphúra red color was associated with the concept of political, commercial and economic power, as well as with equality and justice. For instance, *hellanodikai*<sup>23</sup> in Ancient Olympia would wear characteristic deep red garments, just like *metics*<sup>24</sup> during the Panathenaia celebrations. Dark colors in general, but especially black, were colors of mourning and sadness. At funerals, black or dark clothing, such as deep green, deep red, and dark gray, was a sign of deep sorrow and sadness in most cities of classical Greece. It should be added that wearing black as a sign of mourning was not exclusive to death-related mourning, but was observed in other events as well. For example, when a woman visited her husband in prison, she would wear a black tunic to show how much she suffered from such a misery. There were regulations, probably varying from city to city, governing mourning dress, as well as the length of mourning. A typical example was the city of Argos where the mourning color was white.

The dangerous toxicity of some dyes constituted also an important narrative element in mythology and specifically in Sophocles tragedy *Women of Trachis* or *The Trachiniae*, which metaphorically presented the 'insidious', almost diabolical effect of some poisonous dyes that were fatal to the wearer. According to the text, Deianeira, waiting in Trachis for the return

of her husband Hercules was aware that he would bring with him the beautiful princess Ioli. In her jealousy and despair, she decided to take revenge on him for this and thus she impregnated a chiton with the poison of the mythical nine-headed water-serpent Lernaean Hydra, which she sent with her son Hyllos to Hercules to wear as a festive garment during the performance of some thanksgiving sacrifice. Hercules wore the chiton and as he approached the altar fire, the chiton began to melt his flesh, leading him to a torturous death.<sup>25</sup>

Euripides also uses similar metaphors to indicate the toxicity of dyes in the fabrics and clothing of his time through the plot of his play *Medea*. According to this great tragedy, Medea herself used her magical potions to avenge the beautiful daughter of the King of Corinth Creon, Glauce, also known as Creusa, who had an affair with Medea's husband, Jason, by a torturous death. So, she sent her, along with her own children, a dress imbued with poisonous herbs as a wedding gift, and when she put it on her body began to burn and melt like wax.<sup>26</sup>

Garments with colors, such as the very popular white or off-white, as well as green, dark blue, purple, deep red, yellow, decorated not only with representations of human or divine figures, animals, and plants, but also with various geometric shapes, many times repeated, such as checks and stripes, were woven or embroidered mainly at their ends, adding texture and visual interest. One of the most characteristic geometric symbols found not only in textiles and clothing, but also in other forms of applied arts such as ceramic jars and vessels, temples, various monuments, sculptures, weapons of war and armor, was the meander. This Greek key pattern was named after the river Meander in Asia Minor, present-day Turkey, and was symbolic of its twisting and winding course. In textiles, especially the ceremonial ones, it added a sense of harmony and rhythm and revealed the wearer's religious, cultural and social status. It also represented the sense of the infinite, the endless, but also of precision and completion dating back to classical antiquity. It also represented the visual expression of the quintessence of ancient Greek thought, the harmonious reconciliation of opposites at the highest possible degree and depicted the endless flow of time, the completion of repeated time cycles, but also the mysterious and unknown moods of fate. In mythology it was connected to the path of Virtue, which was complex and difficult, but also chaste and righteous in contrast to the path of Vice which was straight, smooth and easy, but destructive which posed a challenge to the demigod Heracles, who, while at the crossroads, had to choose one of the two.<sup>27</sup>

### **1c) Weaving in Greek folk tradition**

As in antiquity, so also in the post-Byzantine era, especially during the period of the Ottoman occupation, the weaving activity was particularly intense especially among the female population of the country. As societies at the time were ethnically and culturally fragmented, especially during the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century, there were no fiber and cloth production guilds, so weaving was almost exclusively a domestic occupation. Fabrics were woven to cover major clothing needs (such as the traditional costumes of each place), as well as basic household needs (tablecloths, towels, sheets, pillows, kilims, carpets, curtains, blankets). In addition, fabrics were produced for work purposes, such as sacks for transporting products, several types of cheesecloths for straining cheese, nets for harvesting olives, fruit or for fishing, boat sails, strings, ropes, and others, which were woven with great dedication and care. At the same time, it should be stressed that the process and tools of the preparation of the thread and the various types of cloth often took on metaphysical implications and were associated with various symbolisms, many folk rituals and religious practices and beliefs, and motivated the creation of songs, poems, verses, proverbs and fairy tales that shaped entire generations of Greeks until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>28</sup>

However, from the end of the eighteenth and especially during the nineteenth century, this domestic occupation was not enough to meet the increasing needs that arose and followed the corresponding restructuring of local societies, but also the restructuring of Greek society and the rebuilding of the nation after the revolution of 1821 against the Ottomans. During this time, the art of weaving evolved into a more organized craft activity that was not only limited to serving domestic needs, but also began to respond to the ever-increasing commercial and export demands. The textile trades, in the form of guilds, with a predominantly male workforce, organized and coordinated the production of an entire region and were responsible for promoting domestic production abroad.<sup>29</sup> In addition to being craftsmen, men also excelled as woven textile traders, as they procured it mainly from the countryside looms and later from the urban looms and sold it in the domestic or international markets. By and large the development and flowering of the weaving art in Greece, both at a home and professional production level, coincided with the era of the general heyday of Greek folk art during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Folklore professor Nadia Maha-Bizoumi, historical, economic, social and other factors explain the emergence of important textile centers throughout Greece. The textiles were produced in these cen-

ters exceeded the limits of domestic consumption and entered successfully an important network of markets and regions, mainly thanks to their special morphological characteristics and their high quality. The production and distribution of Greek textiles in the wider Balkans was regulated, above all, by the system of seasonal and weekly trade fairs by region.<sup>30</sup>



**Fig. 1-1** Traditional loom of the mid-nineteenth century, broader Attica region.

The works of traditional folk weaving were distinguished mainly for their color combinations and the abundance of their decorative patterns. Their rich colors came from vegetable pigments, mainly from roots, leaves, fruits of plants, etc. as they made them not just beautiful and harmonious, but unique. A necessary apparatus for the weaving of all kinds of textiles, which was not missing from any home, was the wooden ‘seated’ or ‘slanted’ loom, a development of the archaic loom we have already met. This wooden weaving machine, which existed in every rural home mainly during the pre-industrial era, played a key role in the household economy, and was replaced by the mechanical loom during the industrial revolution and beyond. The classic wooden loom was a simple mechanical structure supported by four vertical pieces of wood connected at the bottom by four

thick planks and four more on top of them. On top of this basic rectangular system were placed the numerous components of the main mechanism, such as the warp<sup>31</sup>, cloth beams<sup>32</sup>, and shuttle<sup>33</sup> etc.

The weaver used to sit at one end of the loom with her body inside this wooden structure and with the help of her hands and feet, passing other threads perpendicularly to the warps with the help of the wooden shuttle, she created the fabric. With her feet she stepped on four pedals, which moved the warps, while the shuttle each time passed between different combinations of warp positions, thus forming the fabric and its patterns. In order for the fabric to be densely woven, the threads were beaten with the help of a part of the loom called reed<sup>34</sup>. The weaver, depending on her technical knowledge and talent, could make many types of cloth such as striped blankets or rugs, towels, sheets (chrams), woolen and cotton bags and sacks, and even woolen cloth for clergy robes. It should be noted, however, that the tradition rules of each place did not usually allow innovations and influences in the patterns and designs of the fabrics, which is why in most cases they were reproduced exactly the same from generation to generation.

The distaff was another important weaving tool which, as we have already seen, came from Greek antiquity having retained the same technical and functional features. However, depending on its construction it was then divided into three different categories. The so-called 'genuine' distaff was much more complex than that of antiquity as it consisted of a cylindrical stem that widened upwards and had distinguishing carved or engraved designs on it such as birds, human figures, crosses, moons, snakes and various geometric shapes. The so-called 'crossed' or 'fastening' distaff was also highly decorated and consisted of two crossed pieces of wood, while the distaff with the basket was a one-piece, cylindrical or polygonal in shape tool. Its key characteristic was a small basket at its basis, which moved freely, since it was passed into a semi-cylindrical ring.<sup>35</sup> The spindle and the whorl did not show any particular differences from their original forms, centuries ago.

In terms of textile materials, they were exactly the same used in ancient times, although the way they were harvested and processed was quite different, depending on the era and the region. Wool was the most important material, as it was used throughout Greece to weave kilims, both simple and ornamented with elaborate embroidered designs, blankets and chrams, i.e. woolen, light, colorful woven covers that were thrown on the saddle of a horse or used as bedclothes. Also, sacks for carrying food or tools called *torvades*, specific types of capes, the so-called *skutia*, wall hangings, namely *pantes*, various kinds of bedding and aprons. Some items such as



the classic *tagari*,<sup>36</sup> but also the mill sacks, straw sacks, seed sacks and the elongated kilims for the corridors were made from goat wool which was coarser and had a rougher texture.



**Fig. 1-2** Kilim woven in the loom, mid-nineteenth century, Arachova region.

Cotton, in the form of yarn, was a material not only for the manufacture of fabrics for domestic consumption, but also an important export product from as early as the second half of the eighteenth century. The cotton yarn

and textile production guilds of Tirnavos, Agia and Ambelakia in the wider region of Thessaly, Serres in eastern Macedonia and Ioannina in Epirus were particularly successful. Its basic processing was the following: the cotton, after being cleaned and washed, was dried, cut, carded and then spun with the distaff and spindle. Cotton woven fabrics were used to make waistcoats, men's and women's underwear, swaddling cloths, towels, baby diapers, sheets, pillowcases, etc.

Flax was cultivated in the foothills of mountains, such as Vermio in Western Macedonia, and was used as a raw material for the manufacture of headscarves in the regions of Naoussa and Veria. Well-known centers for the production of linen fabrics for the manufacture of mainly clothing and underwear were also the villages of Zagoria and Pogonia in Epirus and Galaxidi in West Central Greece. The processing of flax, from the harvest to the manufacture of the thread, was an exclusively female occupation. The women collected the flax, washed it, brushed it until it was clean, and then spun it to make the so-called *ramma*, i.e. a thread so fine and delicate that could easily pass through the eye of a needle. It was a very difficult task that required a lot of attention and constant hard work.<sup>37</sup>

Silk was also one of the most important textile materials, a symbol of luxury and power as early as the Byzantine era during which it was under the strict control of the Emperor himself. On the contrary, in the Ottoman Empire it was a traditional activity of little economic importance. In the Greek villages and cities of Halkidiki, Macedonia, but also of Thessaly, Peloponnese and especially in Soufli in Thrace, its production flourished. Its processing was as follows: before the chrysalis could pierce the cocoons, the women would expose them to the sun or dry them out in an oven. Cocoons were then boiled in a special cauldron to soften the thread so as to be more easily pulled and unwound, since silk is woven without a warp. With this fabric they made luxurious clothes and underwear, face towels, headscarves, but also wedding shirts and veils.<sup>38</sup>

Until about the end of the nineteenth century, the only materials used to dye threads were, as in antiquity, the vegetable dyes derived from flowers, leaves, weeds, fruits or fruit peels, plant roots and tree barks. Many of these yielded strong and others less strong dyes to be used in yarn dyeing. Indicatively, it is stated that for the pink and red shades, roots, leaves or fruits from the prickly pear, eucalyptus and madder were used, whereas for the yellow, orange or brown shades the flowers of marigold, chamomile and radishes, but also the leaves of the almond tree, were employed. For the shades of green the leaves of spinach, mint, nettle and artichoke were utilized, while the shades of blue were achieved with the use of the leaves of the hyacinth, centaury and indigo, as well as the fruits of the bean plant.<sup>39</sup>

The vegetable dyes were stable and unchangeable in sunlight and washing, giving beautiful, brilliant colors. However, it was not always easy to find the desired tone and shade as the plants did not always have a constant pigment content.<sup>40</sup> The yarn dyeing process had three main stages:

- a) dyeing, i.e. the preparation by washing the wool in order to accept the dyes,
- b) dyeing, i.e. changing the color of the raw textile material by boiling in decoctions of the desired plants and
- c) fixing the color achieved by boiling the dyed fibers in tartaric acid solution.

### **1d) Types of traditional weaving in different regions of Greece**

Across almost the entire country, from Thessaly, Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace, the Peloponnese and the Ionian Islands, to the islands of the Eastern Aegean, the northern Sporades, the Cyclades, the Dodecanese and Crete, woven fabrics were made with all the aforementioned materials. The technical and aesthetic variations found in the decorated textiles in Greece were numerous, as each region, guided by its particular artistic perception and cultural identity, developed its own distinct tradition.

However, the local textile creations were sometimes enriched with elements brought by intermarriages, population or individuals movements, commercial transactions and also foreign influences—both Eastern and Western—which, once assimilated and reinterpreted, came to characterize Greek folk art as a whole. Textiles were directly influenced by the clothing needs of each place, the social organization, the climate and the configuration of the interiors of vernacular architecture. Among the most impressive works of modern Greek weaving, completely associated, like the works of embroidery, with the interior of the northern Greek or Aegean house, were the polymorphic and multiform chrams, the kilims, the rags, the carpets, the ornamental textiles for the fireplace, the wall hangings, the flocats<sup>41</sup> which were also made for decorative purposes.

The textiles of the mainland and especially of Macedonia and Thrace were famous for their complex and imaginative techniques and decoration. They often had a diagonal arrangement in the weave, a particularly difficult technique, most commonly found in traditional aprons from Soufli. Their execution on the loom required great technical skill and experience, which is why they are considered among the finest examples of Greek folk weaving.

The analysis of the color rhythm in the textiles of Macedonia and Thrace, not only shows the high aesthetics in terms of colors and their combinations, but also the effect that the color rhythm exerted on the folk artistic expression. When tradition was still alive and vivid, weavers were obliged to use the specific colors of their areas, as well as the style established for each design. The restrictions imposed by folk art on the use of colors were even stricter than the restrictions on the use of decorative elements. The weavers of the Western Macedonia village of Velvendos were specialized in a single type of fabric, the cotton towels that were well-known throughout Macedonia and were exported<sup>42</sup>, while in Siatista and Kastoria, in addition to colorful embroidered handicrafts and rich carpets, textiles by stitching various colorful pieces of waste fabric, were also made.

In Epirus textiles followed the arrangement and decoration of the house interiors and were mainly woolen, heavily decorated furniture covers, accompanied by large, comfortable cushions, wall hangings, as well as colorful, large kilims for the floor.



**Fig. 1-3** Loom woven wall hanging, representing the dance of the women of Souli, Epirus, 1912.

In Central Greece and especially in the village of Arachova, women shaped the tradition for the well-known Arachovite textiles. They produced hand-made all-wool textiles, as well as golden embroidered motifs for traditional costumes, embroidered fabrics for the home as well as special golden embroidery depicting ecclesiastical themes. In the region of

Aitoliko and Messolonghi, the most characteristic type of woven fabric was *velentza*, a type of particularly heavy bedding, used occasionally as a rug, which was made from sheep and goat wool.

In Larissa, Thessaly, the *damota* fabrics, i.e. the fabrics with geometric, usually square shapes, were especially famous.

Also in Karditsa, Thessaly, the so-called 'loop woven fabrics', fabrics from which loops protrude in various types of bedclothes and wall hangings, were particularly famous. In general, the textiles of Thessaly were renowned, which is why K. Makris mentions the following:

*'Each Thessalian textile is a highlighted chronicle of distant local history. Within them ancient paeans, Byzantine melodies, oriental songs, folk songs do resonate along with the sorrows and the desires of a people who have the power to plant the flowers of joy in soil watered with tears and blood. As you look at a Thessalian textile, you dare to face the Thessalian plain from above, a huge carpet, where history has left its footprints'.*<sup>43</sup>

In the Peloponnese, the textiles of Tsakonia, an area of the Kynouria province of the prefecture of Arcadia, were renowned. Its textiles, which cannot be found anywhere else in Greece, marked the traditional weaving art of the region, which began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for purely practical and subsistence reasons. At first locals wove sacks to carry the grain from the fields, bags to take their food to work, long and narrow kilims and carpets to warm their houses in winter or even dowry pieces for their female children. Initially their designs were simple, then geometric and later their subject matter was taken from nature where the materials for coloring the threads came from.

In the Greek islands, due to the different geographical, cultural and socio-economic situation, there were significant differences in the production of textiles. The case of Lefkada, one of the largest Ionian islands, is typical where, in addition to the woven wall hangings intended for the kitchens and accompanied by the *kanaposkouti*, i.e. a cover for the sofa and the matching woven cushions, the tablecloths and the towels, the so-called *spathes*, the weaving art was particularly intertwined with the famous *karpeta*, a type of woolen, heavy bed cloth. Karpetas had a wide variety of decorative, geometric motifs and bold colors arranged in horizontal bands, while in each of them the personal contribution of the weaver was easily discernible.<sup>44</sup>





**Fig. 1-4** A characteristic example of a woolen karpeta from Lefkada with vivid colors and geometric patterns, nineteenth century.

Santorini, Cyclades, has been well-known for its weaving art since ancient times. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, with the development of the cultivation of Theraic cotton, a local, perennial and very resistant variety of cotton, all kinds of fabrics and clothing were wo-