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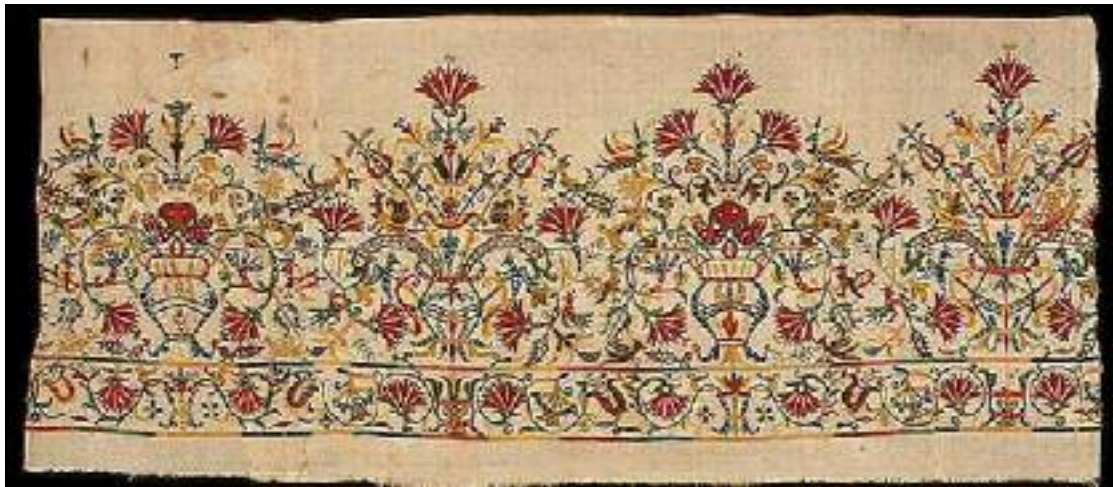
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## The Tale of the Two-Tailed Mermaid A Case Study in the Origins of the Cretan Embroidery Style

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Called *gorgona* in modern Greek, the two-tailed mermaid, often interchangeable with the traditional one-tailed mermaid, had been part of the ancient Greek mythology as well as part of Medieval and Renaissance art and thinking. The Mermaid, who appears as a beautiful woman with long hair and with a moving fish-tail, symbolizes many, often opposing, ideas in the popular culture. With many names such as Mixoparthenos, Scylla to Melusine, she appears most of the time as a kind of fish-demon, of which the fish-tail is the serpent in disguise, the one that lost her Humanity. She has been seen as an original mother, a protectress, and at the same time a ferocious seductress who sang bewitchingly and drew men to their death.<sup>1</sup>

The two-tailed mermaid is often shown full-face. Below her navel, her body splits into two fish-tails that coil up on either side of her. She grasps the two tails with outstretched hands as if to keep her balance. On her head is a crown. We see this representation on Cretan embroidered textiles, on women's garments, cushions and large covers. The motif is always part of a complex and crowded composition of plant and floral spirals, often including in miniature, human figures, animals, birds, and imaginary beasts (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>



*Fig. 1. Skirt border (fragment), Crete, 17th century.  
The Textile Museum 81.50, acquired by George Hewitt Myers before or in 1925.*

<sup>1</sup> Cazenave 1996, pp. 403-04 and pp. 634-36.

<sup>2</sup> It is not clear if the two-tailed mermaid motif had similar connotations in Cretan culture as it did in Medieval and Renaissance Italy, most probably not, because of the way she appears and the frequency of her appearance.

Cretan women, who show their embroidery skills on the hems of their long full skirts, wore them to hang from above the bust line using short shoulder straps to hold it in place.<sup>3</sup> A tunic with large sleeve-ends was probably worn underneath this skirt. By the mid-19th century when people began collecting this material, these skirts and other related garments were long out of fashion and even the older generation was not wearing them. This was probably when the embroidered ends of most of these skirts were cut into panels to be kept as heirlooms or sold. Thus, very little is known about the actual way the garment was worn and there is great uncertainty about the other parts of the Cretan costume.<sup>4</sup>

The presumed way of wearing the skirt creates a silhouette that is often recognized as a Renaissance woman's silhouette, with the high bustline and long full skirt. This style of skirt was probably introduced by the Venetians, adapted first by the wealthy Latin elite, and then accepted by all levels of society. Travel memoirs from the 17th and 18th centuries often contain descriptions and engravings showing Cretan women wearing a garment with a short bustline and a very long full skirt, indicating the adaptation of the style as traditional Cretan dress.<sup>5</sup>

From the few surviving skirts and hems, we know that the tailoring was very simple. The skirt was constructed of 5 loom-width rectangular panels without any shaping. Each panel was between 61 and 70 cm wide.<sup>6</sup> The top part of the skirt was gathered with small pleats. The only decoration on the skirt was a 30-45 cm-high embroidered band along the hemline. Each panel was embroidered separately before the skirt was assembled, so the design did not always perfectly match at the seams.

The fabric used to construct the skirts is balanced plain weave and woven tightly, possibly to avoid transparency.<sup>7</sup> Linen warp and cotton weft yarns—both Z-spun and undyed—are very characteristic of Cretan textiles used as foundation fabric for the embroidered skirts as well as for cushions and covers.

The yarns used for the embroidery were untwisted or very slightly twisted silk.<sup>8</sup> And very similar to the yarns seen on other embroidered textiles from the Aegean Islands with the exception of Rhodes. There are some Cretan textiles where the embroidery thread was produced by twisting together two or three different color silk fibers, such as red and yellow or red, blue, and yellow (fig. 2).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This garment is known as *foustani* or *poukamiso* (Johnston 1972a, pp. 28-30 and 99-109).

<sup>4</sup> Pauline Johnston mentions that “traveler F. W. Sieber, writing in 1817, commented that in his day the dress illustrated by Tournefort was only worn by old women and a few girls in the towns, while most of the women had adopted Turkish fashions (Johnston 1972b, p. 68.).

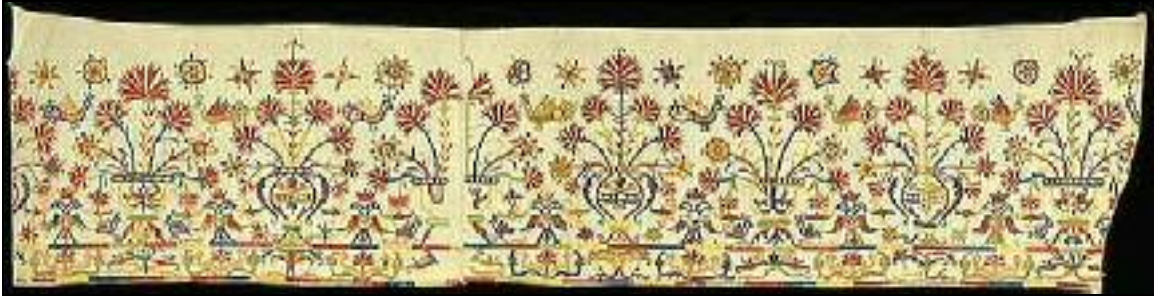
<sup>5</sup> Tournefort 1718, pp. 66-67.

<sup>6</sup> Approximately 24.5” x 28”, the skirts had a circumference of 300-350 cm.

<sup>7</sup> In balanced plain weave, warp and weft yarns are either equally spaced or identical or approximately equal in size and flexibility, they are visible in equal amount (Emery 1994, p. 76).

<sup>8</sup> Yarns used for embroidery by Cretan women seem to be very similar in character to the ones used in Ottoman embroidery; most of these yarns might have been possibly coming from commercial silk producing centers than the local production areas.

<sup>9</sup> In the embroidered textiles with this type of thread, designs tend to be little less well articulated. There is not enough information available to posit if this was a regional preference in Crete or these textiles date later in 18th century.



*Fig. 2. Skirt border (fragment), Crete, early 18th century.  
The Textile Museum 81.54A, acquired by George Hewitt Myers before or in 1928.*

The Cretan embroidery style is recognizable by its design and technique. What distinguishes this style is the embroiderers' preference for using a variety of colors and stitches in the same textile (fig. 3). The colors used are primary colors—red, green, blue, shades of yellow (from light to gold), brown, as well as white and black. In nearly all other Greek Island embroidery styles one or, at most, two types of stitches were used in one single piece of work, whereas in the Cretan textiles several different stitches—five or more—were employed to achieve the designs drawn on their foundation fabrics.<sup>10</sup> The stitches encountered most often are Cretan, herringbone, satin, knot, chain, stem, and outline stitches; embroiderers also used couching and whipping to give further dimension to their stem and outline stitches.



*Fig. 3. Skirt border (detail), Crete, 17th century.  
The Textile Museum 81.50, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1925.*

<sup>10</sup> The design drawn on the front of the fabric, because the fabric is thick for the drawing to be visible if done on the back.

The Cretan stitch and herringbone stitch were often used interchangeably in Cretan embroidery. They fill motifs as well as create lines. The Cretan stitch looks very similar to the herringbone stitch. But the Cretan stitch has a recognizable braid-like part in the center and produces short lines packed on top of each other at either side of the motif on the reverse of the foundation fabric, while herringbone produces parallel lines of single straight stitches in alternating alignment.

The use of color plays an important part in the Cretan embroidery style by helping us distinguish two sub-styles. One of these sub-styles might be termed “polychrome” as oppose to the other one that could be termed “monochrome.” The latter style is characterized by the use of single color, either bright red or dark deep blue on individual textiles.<sup>11</sup>

Two-tailed mermaids often appear in the polychrome designs and are placed above flower vases, from which spring flowers, branches, and tendrils. Many real or fantastic creatures perch on these branches. The compositions are very free flowing, but also complex and crowded especially where the repeats are tightly placed. Besides the two-tailed mermaid, the double-headed eagle, birds with fantastic tails, snakes, and carnations appear very often in this style. All of these motifs can be found with little alteration in European pattern books and decorations as well as in embroidered textiles and lace produced in Europe, especially in Venice.

From existing large covers and cushion covers, we know that they share the same motifs, colors, and techniques with the embroidery found on the skirts. The design layouts are, on the other hand, rather different than the ones on the skirts. Cushions generally have narrow borders on four sides and a large central medallion. The covers exhibit very intricate overall repeat patterns. The large surfaces these covers provide seem to give embroiderers the freedom to explore organizing their motifs in two dimensions rather than just horizontal.

The use of strong brilliant, almost jewel-like colors and the juxtapositions of these colors create strong, but pleasing contrasts, giving the designs in polychrome embroidery an energy that is not often seen in the monochrome Cretan embroidery style. The monochrome style employs much simpler and stiffer designs. Although the two-tailed mermaid, vase with flowers, and animals also appear in this style, their presentations do not have the vitality we see in the design of the polychrome style.

From the few dated examples in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum, we could posit that both of these Cretan embroidery styles appear to be in use around the same time, from the late 17th to middle of the 18th centuries. The earliest example, a skirt in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, is dated 1697 and the latest example, a skirt in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum is dated 1762.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Textile Museum collection contains only polychrome examples.

<sup>12</sup> The Victoria and Albert Museum also has two other skirts dated to 1733 and 1757; these skirts are signed by Georgia Grammatikopoulos and Mara Papadopoulo, respectively. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has another skirt that is dated to 1726 (Haywood 1983, pp. 286-89, Petrakis, 1977, p. 41 Johnston 1972a, pp. 100-01, and Johnston 1972b, pp. 61-68).

If we consider this group of dated skirts as the representative group for Cretan embroidery style, all of the dated polychrome skirts come from the late 17th and the early 18th century. The monochrome style appears primarily on skirts produced in the later part of that 65-year period. This might be a coincidence; it might, however, be the result of political and social changes taking place in the island. Although 65 years is a short period of time for a traditional style to alter dramatically, for Crete, the late 17th century, especially the year 1669, corresponds to the finalization of the change in the island's control from Venetian to Ottoman hands.

After the devastation that the Fourth Crusade brought to Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire in 1204, Frankish forces carved out the Empire. Venice demanded and took control of areas that would reinforce her mastery of the Mediterranean Sea and give her an unbroken chain of ports along the route from the lagoon on which Venice sits to the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, including the Aegean Islands and especially the all-important island of Crete.<sup>13</sup>

Venetians entrusted the ruling of these new lands to vassals, usually the younger sons of leading Venetian families who set themselves up as petty princelings in Thrace, Anatolia and on the Aegean Sea islands. Only a few of the most strategically important bases remained under the direct control of Venice. Crete was one of those few. By 1211, Crete—or, as the Venetians called it Candia after its capital city—had become Venice's first properly constituted overseas colony.<sup>14</sup> Venice established a government in Crete based on its own, with a governor who bore the title of Doge except that he and his successors were to hold office for two years instead of for life. This arrangement resulted in a new Doge and his retinue arriving at the island every two years; we can be certain that with these officials and their families came the European ideas and fashions of the day. Prominent Venetian families, who flooded the island after the colony was established, also brought with them their religion, way of life, and customs. They acquired the most fertile parts of the island and established themselves as new nobility of the island, displacing the native Greeks.

By the end of the 14th century there was scarcely a single major commodity that was not transported in Venetian ships and did not pass through the Aegean Sea or stop at Crete. There were normally six or so regularly scheduled major trading convoys a year, each consisting of up to 500 ships—occasionally more.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Crete was under Islamic control for 140 years beginning in 820. Byzantine emperors attempted to recover the island several times and succeeded in 961, and held the island until 1024. For the Fourth Crusade see Norwich 2003, p. 141; Spratt 1865, pp. p. 27-28; Stavrianos 2001, pp. 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> Norwich 2003, pp. 542-46.

<sup>15</sup> Norwich 2003, p. 162, 215, 170-71, 272. Immense convoys sailed regularly from various parts of the Mediterranean and Black Sea ports, trading bales of silk from Central Asia, spices from India and further East, and cotton from Anatolia and the Eastern Mediterranean. From the ports of Caffa and Soldaia (now Sudak) came the furs, and from the Russian North came slaves. Venetian ships also carried increasing quantities of sugar and a sweet, heavy wine called Malmsey; the demand for both was now insatiable throughout Europe. The first supplies of sugar had come from Syria as early as the 11th century, but now Venetian entrepreneurs had introduced it in Crete as well as in Cyprus. Venetians established vast agricultural estates which were maintain by slaves—Georgians, Armenians and Circassians—from the Black Sea slave trade run by Venetians. Crete, Cyprus and parts of the Morea, were also the main producers of that sweet, heavy wine known as Malmsey named after the

It is not hard for us to imagine Crete in the 14th-16th centuries as one of few very important and rich harbors at the center of world trade. This wealth unquestionably helped to form a wealthy and cosmopolitan Latin merchant class and an urban bourgeoisie. This group had close ties with Venice, the mother city, ties that were renewed every two years. Embroidered textiles serve as a testament to this relationship by exhibiting designs obviously inspired by European textiles and pattern books that found their way to Crete at this time.<sup>16</sup>

We can easily recognize from European pattern books and textiles, Cretan motifs, like the two-tailed mermaid, vases with flowers, especially carnations, musicians and dancers depicted sitting on or standing around tendrils that are twisting and turning. Cretan embroidery designs as well as the construction of the women's dresses appear to be a direct adaptation of these Renaissance designs and fashion. All of the surviving examples of embroidered textiles, however, date from the late 17th century to the middle of the 18th century—a period following the glory days of Venice and Crete as the center of trade routes originating from Eastern Mediterranean and it is also the period that Crete was under Ottoman control. These textiles, their construction and designs, give us a sense of being frozen sometime in the 15th or early 16th century. This statement might not be far from the truth; starting in the 16th century, Crete and the rest of the Aegean islands saw great drops in trade and revenues generated by trade. They become backwaters for long-distance traders. This was a direct result of the new trade routes opened around the coast of Africa and to America.<sup>17</sup> These new routes struck a devastating blow to the commercial supremacy of Venice—and, indeed, to the whole importance of the Mediterranean as a highway to the East.

Despite the extreme fertility of the island, life for a Cretan was a struggle under Venetian control. Venice was unwilling to change the feudal system under which Cretans were living since 1211 and made herself very unpopular among her subjects. This resentment worked to the Ottoman advantage, and, by the late 1660s the Ottoman Empire captured the whole island, ending 495 years of Venetian colonial rule. During the centuries leading up to the late 17th century, while Venice's power was waning, the Ottoman Empire was already expanding her territory south in the Aegean Sea and had an eye on the strategically located Crete which is at the entrance to the Aegean Sea on the route to and from Cairo, Istanbul, and Black Sea.<sup>18</sup>

The Ottoman occupation of the island was administratively different than the Venetian occupation. The Ottomans annexed the island to the empire and ran it as part of the

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port of Monemvasia from where most of it was shipped and which northern Europeans drunk with such relish.

<sup>16</sup> Trilling 1983, pp. 27-29.

<sup>17</sup> Vasco Da Gama landed at Lisbon on 9 September 1499. Da Gama was not the first to travel from Europe to the Indies entirely by sea, but he was the first who did it non-stop. See İnalçık and Quataert 1994a, p. 342; İnalçık and Quataert 1994b, pp 520-21; Norwich 2003, p. 386.

<sup>18</sup> İnalçık and Quataert 1994b, pp. 423-24; Norwich 2003, p. 473, pp. 545-46; Stavrianos 2000, pp. 165-66.

empire instead of a colony.<sup>19</sup> With the fall of city of Candia to Ottomans in 1669, the prominent Greek families of the island left the island with the Venetians. The first decades of Ottoman rule saw an influx of the local population into the Cretan cities, like Candia. The Ottoman officers and administrators arriving from Istanbul and immigration from around the Aegean also supplemented this influx. With the exception of Ottoman officers and administrators, the new immigrants were peasants from the countryside and many of them were Greeks, who were often recent converts to Islam. Meanwhile commercial ties to Venice were slow to die, but eventually France developed ties with Crete and took over the island's trade by the 18th century.<sup>20</sup> The new political environment and changes in population affected culture as well as social life.

The century following Ottoman occupation, in the late 17th century, witnessed the slow disappearance of embroidered textiles, we know of, from the trousseaus of young girls. F. W. Sieber, writing in 1817, commented that in his day the dress illustrated by earlier travelers was only worn by old women and a few girls in the towns, while most of the women had adopted Turkish fashions with pants, called shalvars. The Turkish way of dressing was the norm when Robert Pashley visited the island in 1834. He commented "there is scarcely any perceptible difference, to an eye neither practiced nor skillful in observing articles of female apparel, between the dresses of Greek and Turkish ladies..."<sup>21</sup> He also referred to Greek as "the common language of the island." Both Ottomans and Christians spoke Greek at home as their mother tongue, and very few knew Turkish and those tend to be among the city dwellers.<sup>22</sup>

The century leading up to the Ottoman occupation in the late 17th century could be seen as the period when the Cretan embroidery style took its final shape. During the previous centuries Cretan women were copying, transforming and adapting many Italian Renaissance patterns and dress forms which helped them to formulate their own style. The crystallization of the Cretan embroidery style in the 17th century appears to be the effect of several interconnected factors. From the 14th century onwards, an increasing number of wealthy Greek women started entering Latin households as wives. The increasing presence there of Greek servant women and slaves, who bore the illegitimate children of Latin fathers, modified the character of Latin households as well as served as conduit for the exchange of artistic ideas between Latins and Greeks. Against Venice's official government policy of enforcing segregation or assimilation, Latins and Greeks, because they were sharing the same confined space, inevitably needed to accommodate each other's culture.<sup>23</sup> At the same time the practical ethnic distinctions were blurring, the character of Eastern Mediterranean trade was changing, and Venice was losing its mastery of the trade that she had since the Middle Ages. This slowdown undoubtedly had an effect on the circulation of new artistic ideas and new patterns, which had flowed frequently into the island with Venetian merchants and nobility in previous centuries. A

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<sup>19</sup> Ottoman control of the island lasted for 288 (two hundred eighty eight) years. By 1897, Crete became an autonomous island. It stayed that way until 1913, when it was incorporated into Greece. See İnalçık and Quataert 1994a; Miller 1908, p. 636-43; Stavrianos 2001, pp. 165-69.

<sup>20</sup> Greene 2000, pp. 9-10 and 36-44, and 128-31.

<sup>21</sup> Johnston 1972b, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup> Pashley 1837, p. 8 and p. 181 and Greene 2000, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> McKee 1993, p. 229-49.



weakened Venice also meant lighter hand of Venice controlling the island and its society. This was happening during the same time that the prominent Greek families of the island (*archontopoula*) finally gained hard-worn privileges from Venice and increased their wealth and status. They also shifted the focus of trade somewhat away from the long distance trade to short distance trade. All of these factors appear to provide right environment and freedom for Greek women to formulate their own distinct embroidery style using Italian designs and stitches as their inspiration. The polychrome Cretan embroidery style was probably the result of this creation. The introduction of monochrome embroidery style might have been, however, the first phase of the gradual change which led to the disappearance of the Cretan embroidery style in the early 19th century.

Many factors had an effect on Cretan culture, and seem to have contributed to bringing the Cretan embroidery tradition to an end: The long wars between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, some fought on Crete in the second half of the 17th century; the changing social climate of the island; European fashion ideas arriving with French ships and Ottoman artistic ideas arriving with Ottoman ships; Muslim merchant families and Ottoman officials in the 18th century, all contributed to this decline.

The Venetian's control of trade in the Eastern Mediterranean in the early modern period, the struggle between Venice and the Ottoman Empire for control of the Eastern Mediterranean, the eventual Ottoman control of Crete – all these events had an impact on the formulation of the embroidery tradition we recognize as the Cretan embroidery style today. It is fascinating to trace the style and motifs of embroidered textiles from the Greek Islands back to these two political powers that held the islands in their control for centuries. This will become more apparent in coming chapters discussing other embroidery styles seen in the Greek Islands and the Epirus region of Greece.

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