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1992

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Bradley-Griebel, Helen, "Sparto: A Greek Textile Plant" (1992). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 573.

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## SPARTO: A GREEK TEXTILE PLANT

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## INTRODUCTION

Cotton and flax are known as plants whose fibers are used in the manufacture of textiles, and hemp and jute are known as plants used to make rope. Less well known for its contribution to both textile and rope manufacture is the plant sparto (Spartium junceum L.; Spanish broom) which grows wild over much of the Mediterranean region in brushwood localities of the mountainous and semi-mountainous zones, including the area of my fieldwork village on the West Coast of the Greek Peloponnesos.

Sparto is a perennial broom, growing as a shrub not reaching over 3 m. in height. Its abundant green branches are slender and sharply-pointed. Leaves are small; and tiny, bright yellow flowers form spikes at the ends of stems and appear from May through July.

Sparto's use for rope and textile manufacture may reach back into Greek pre-history as Homer mentions sparto ropes in the Iliad. Writing in the 1st century A.D., Pliny, in eight books of his Natural History discusses sparto as a source for making ship's rope, bedding, shepherd's clothes and footwear. This testimonia gives evidence for the use of sparto in antiquity, but these sources do not furnish complete descriptions of processing methods. On the other hand, though sparto was commonly exploited in rural Greece until less than a lifetime ago, modern documentation on either the plant's use or its manner of processing is rare.

Because the customs surrounding sparto are still within the living memory of older Greeks, recording information is essential. First, the information explains how sparto was processed in the near past and may give clues to ancient processing methods. Second, the information aids in reconstructing the social meaning of hand-producing textiles in the past. Third, the information helps to explain recent changes in modern, rural Greek society.

One of my primary contributors is Evagelika. In response to my queries about sparto, she offered to demonstrate the step-by-step procedures for processing it. This occurred over two days in August 1990. My narration incorporates information received from a variety of people; but because I participated in most of the steps during Evagelika's demonstrations, these events form the core of my record of processing methods, as well as my analysis of the social implications.

### THE PROCEDURE

From gathering sparto to weaving its fibers into a product, there are seven basic steps. First, sparto is gathered between late spring and mid-August. Gathering includes cutting the branches, trimming the soft pliable branches from the harder stalk and tying the branches into bundles.

Next, the bundles are sometimes boiled for about a half an hour, then they are soaked for ten days in a stream of running water. Lacking such a source, Evagelika soaked her sparto in a large plastic garbage tub, changing the water each day.

After the soaking, the third step is beating the outer husk. A hand-crafted scutching tool, like that used in processing flax, was often used to break sparto, but none of my contributors used such a tool. For example, one woman says she beat sparto with a short-handled *plasteri*, made by a male neighbor, which she usually uses to move bread in a bake oven; and Evagelika used a broken, short-handled wooden paddle which was formally used for washing clothes.



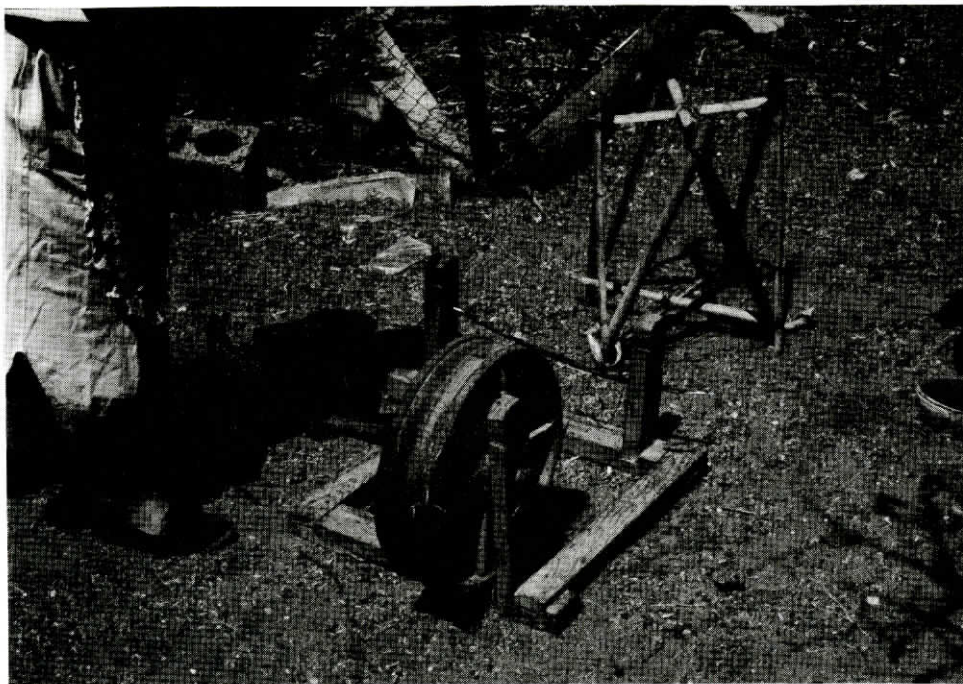


After beating the stems, the fourth step is to extract the fibers. This merely entails stripping the softened outer fibers from the stems.



These fibers contain bits of chaff and are knotted; therefore, the fifth procedure is cleaning and combing the fibers by hand or with hackles. Evagelika's father-in-law made her hackles by inserting metal teeth into wooden, paddle-shaped boards.

Spinning is the sixth step. In Greece, upright wheels with foot treadles are rare. The two mechanisms usually employed are a low hand wheel or a drop spindle. Most Greek women could operate both. A village craftsman made one woman's wheel; and the separate rack to hold the spun thread was made by her father.



The manufacture of a drop spindle is less complicated than the building of a spinning wheel. There are two parts to a drop spindle: the first is the distaff. In the past, men often decorated these with intricate carvings for presentation to a future bride. Yet, as was demonstrated several times, a simple, forked stick serves just as well as a carved distaff.





During the demonstration, for instance, a woman picked up a stick from the yard and broke it to form a fork at one end in which to tie the sparto fibers.

The second part of the drop spindle is the drop itself, merely a stick weighted at the bottom with a whorl. Further evidence of the makeshift tools which might be employed in drop spinning occurred when Evagelika poked a raw onion onto the bottom of the drop stick as a whorl to weight it for spinning.

After spinning, the final step is weaving. Spun sparto was woven into several products. It was hand-braided to form various types of ropes: thinner ropes to tie bundles; thicker ropes to tie animals. Evagelika related that during the World-War-II German occupation, women and children wore home-made shoes with pigskin uppers and soles of braided sparto. Sparto was loom-woven to make winter capes, bed covers, sacks, and most often, carpets. While some older women continue to hand-weave rag carpets, they no longer use sparto or other hand spun fabrics; instead, they now weave with machine manufactured textiles.

#### *THE DYNAMICS OF TRADITION*

Sparto, by itself, is only artifactual, but it was an aspect in the lives of a social group and, as such, may be read as representative of broader aspects of that group's folklife. The customs surrounding sparto serve as a spring board to an assessment of the material within the culture in which it was made and used. As I reviewed the way in which I received information, several social patterns stood out.

Older Greeks are aware that machine-manufactured textiles and other commercially produced objects are replacing items which they once manufactured at home. Men, as well as women, willingly contributed to this study by telling what they knew about processing sparto, thereby expressing pride in being able to share their knowledge of the craft.

Many women, while now embracing new store-bought items, continue to retain the tools associated with making textiles, perhaps with the thought that someday they will go back to these tasks. Women often name the men who made the tools for them; again demonstrating pride in individual craftsmanship, perhaps consciously recognizing something lost as we now purchase machine-produced items to which human names are no longer attached. Often during the interviews, women removed from storage their looms, spinning wheels, hackles and other tools to show me. Thus, these no-longer used tools now function as heirlooms, and the actual purpose for saving them is to be able to reveal to others the materials of the craft traditions which had once occupied so much of a rural woman's lifetime.

It should be noted that Evagelika is the only literate woman from whom I received information for this project; all others can

neither read nor write. Evagelika's contributions to this study, therefore, are of a somewhat different order than those of other women; but perhaps she spoke for them as well when she volunteered very special forms of information. Not only did Evagelika plan and carry out the demonstrations, but she gave me Greek encyclopedias in which she had noted the entries for both sparto and flax; and, she laboriously wrote out for me the processes involved in sparto as she remembered them from her childhood, illustrating her text with drawings. Evagelika's careful consideration and unsolicited presentation of information confirms the value she places on documenting for posterity what she terms "women's work."

In the past, the procedures associated with refining sparto took on a communal outlook, especially for some women. They joined together when the sparto stems were beaten, and they often gathered in each others homes to spin. The spinning session at Evagelika's was certainly a social occasion for the older women who were present. Each took a turn showing her own skill; and when they attempted to instruct me in the technique of drop spinning, they thereby were embracing another woman into their company as well.

Sparto processing was resurrected as a communal event during each of the two sessions at Evagelika's house when neighbors and family members gathered to act as both participants and as audience for the demonstration. Besides the teaching roles played by older women, two other performance patterns--markedly gendered--emerged. The first is that roles were obviously coded by the sex of the individuals. For example, two of Evagelika's sons acted as interpreters, and one prepared the garbage can by filling it with water. This son also entertained the group by giving a solo performance of male Cretan dances at the end of the first day's work.

On the other hand, the tasks of beating, stripping, combing and spinning were done only by the older women. Different cultural expectations were observed, however, when a visiting American male joined in to strip and clean the sparto.

The second role pattern that emerged has to do with age. As with many crafts in the past, those associated with hand-made textiles were learned informally. All women interviewed said that they had learned to spin and weave from an older female relative. With the decline in home-manufacturing of textiles, these techniques are not being passed on. This example of recent alterations in rural Greek society was strikingly confirmed during the demonstration as performance patterns associated specifically with age were observed: During the two days, not one of the younger Greek women joined in to perform any of the tasks! This modern definition of women's roles goes a long way towards explaining the loss of customs surrounding sparto in Greece for, in the past, these younger women would have been expected to learn, by doing, in order to carry on the age-old, domestic customs.

Any material culture study must concern itself with the



dynamics of a tradition. That is, how is a seemingly dead or dying custom, in reality, evolving so that it is actually going on in another form? Three examples will suffice: One, although manufacturing items with sparto is a lost custom, Greeks still use rope and carpets. Now they just buy them. Two, though Greek men no longer help their wives in gathering sparto and crafting the tools to process it, they do continue to help their wives with other domestic tasks. And, finally, though Greek women no longer produce textiles from sparto, they still produce textile handicrafts. Most popular today is crocheting, and new patterns are still passed informally from relatives and friends. Now, however, when a crochet pattern is borrowed, it is often taken to the local Xerox shop for reproduction.

Though the specific abandonment of sparto as a textile plant is but a single aspect of the general trend away from the use of many hand-manufactured items, it is indicative of broader changes within contemporary Greek society.



