



*Objects and Identities: Dowry and Material Culture in Venetian Crete in  
Regional and European Context (1600-1645)*

T. Markaki

## English Summary

### **Objects and Identities: Dowry and Material Culture in Venetian Crete in Regional and European Context (1600-1645)**

Marriage is a key transitional moment in the life of an individual, of a family and of the society these belong to, and, thus, it is often marked by the transmission of movable and/or immovable property. The movable goods, exchanged within the context of marriage rituals, shape and express people's identities. They form part of the dowry, a widespread centuries-old practice that, just like marriage rites in Europe, presents an extraordinary variety in forms and contents. Nevertheless, dowry simultaneously embeds certain typical features, such as the public character of the transfer of goods.

In seventeenth-century Venetian Crete, marriage and dowry had profound socioeconomic and cultural dimensions and a crucial position in family life, as was the case with early modern Italy, Venice, in particular, and other Venetian-controlled areas in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as the island of Naxos. These practices are illuminated by notarial documents which provide information on the legal aspect of both institutions and on the public transmission of the dowry movables. The systematic registration of subtle details of marital objects and of their evaluations in seventeenth-century Venetian Crete is striking. This occurs in a highly differentiated society, located between Venice and Constantinople. This colonial society was a contact zone between the metropolis, Venice, and various local traditions. The residents of the island developed their own identity: a puzzle consisting of many interlocking pieces. In this contact zone, how exactly did people position themselves at their marriage by means of dowry goods? This is the central research question of the present dissertation which deals with the material world of dowry.

The investigated archival documents (the marriage contract, including an inventory of movables, the *stima*, and a groom's receipt) illuminate the marriage process, the dowry value, the composition (immovable and movable property) and several crucial aspects of the materiality of the involved objects. Their large-scale presence in the notarial records makes this source one of the most valuable, yet hardly systematically exploited sources in Venetian Crete. This thesis provides the first systematic study of these notarial documents over a long time period in relation to the study of material culture in Venetian Crete. The documents are written in a mixed Italian, Greek, Venetian and Cretan vocabulary. A glossary, provided with this dissertation and based, partly, on original lexicographical research and, partly, on secondary sources, is a valuable tool for the interpretation and translation of these terms.

The examined time period is the first half of the seventeenth century (1600-1645). This is a peaceful sub-period of the *Golden Age* of the Venetian domination on the island (1571-1669), which ended in 1645 with the outbreak of the fifth Veneto-Turkish War (1645). In this period, the Veneto-Cretan culture, developed in Crete during the 450 years of Venetian rule, reached a climax. Many different elements blended with each other in a multicultural society and moulded a new reality. Especially in Candia (modern Heraklion), processes of self-definition took shape in distinct ways. The religious, ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural dynamics among the urban population groups and the countryside were complex. Candia was a trade centre of vital importance in the seventeenth-century Eastern Mediterranean and maintained close ties with the metropolis, Venice, and other urban areas in Europe and the *Levante*. There was cross-fertilisation among different ethnic and/or social groups, but, at the same time, the boundaries, set by the feudal structure of society, remained. A clear borderline between the elite and non-elite or between urban and rural populations went hand in hand with converging elements, which brought different communities together by underlining their common interests. At the same time, diverging practices segregated these groups forming various parallel

internal hierarchies. These two contradictory processes defined identities within a context of legal/political, socioeconomic and cultural affiliations and made them malleable.

In this context, a mechanism of selective transfer of material and cultural forms was created, visible in the institutions of marriage, dowry and its movables. This is demonstrated by the qualitative and quantitative analyses of two datasets of marriage contracts: a sample of 770 marriage documents, drawn up by 66 notaries, and a subset of 130 documents, drawn up by 28 notaries. The mixed legal character of those institutions, influenced by different legal systems and religious practices, was imprinted in these documents. Their large typological variety and high linguistic diversity demonstrate that they were a typical product of the complex society wherein they were produced.

A total of 8,345 dowry objects, included in the subset of 130 marriage contracts, are scrutinised. The materiality of commodities, i.e. their condition, colour, material or decorative motifs, is brought to the fore. Since the existing studies on the household material culture in Venetian Crete suffer of generalisations and ambiguities, one of the intentions of this research is to disclose the diversity of material culture and details concerning the materiality of objects. Comparisons are made between different geographical, social, economic and professional groups, in the footsteps of researchers of the material culture of other parts of (early) modern Europe, based on the investigation of probate inventories. Certain patterns of household material culture are disclosed.

The extraordinary 'eye for detail' in the *stima* offers the opportunity to point out differences and defines one's own position. Registration of subtle details, along with differentiations of the objects and the public character of the dowry registration and transmission, validated or enhanced the social status and gave families and individuals the opportunity to make a public statement. In this process, what mattered were appearances.

Dowry movables reflected and shaped local, shared and diverse cultures. The separation between urban and rural setting, visible in Candia's impressive walls, is traced in the dowry movables as well. An obvious urban identity is indicated by: the larger variety and quantity of items, larger use of decorative motifs with a 'Venetian touch,' higher degree of buying or making new items, assignment of items which were absent from the dowries in the countryside. All over Europe, new commodities, clothing in particular, were associated mostly, though not exclusively, with urban centres. That was the case in Venetian Crete as well. For instance, the large diversification of silk fabric qualities and the presence of 'exotic' items or other fashionable objects in the dowries of Candia gave evidence of a consumption mentality.

At the same time, the two geographical settings were interconnected. A shared culture existed with priority given to clothing items and bed furnishings. People were inclined to perceive female appearance, domestic activities, such as social dining, and female tasks, such as child-bearing, as crucial within the marital context. Specific clothing items, bed furnishings and table linen functioned as binding factors. Table linen was perceived as something that all felt constrained to possess. Yet, the extremely low presence of dining utensils in the countryside implies that tablecloths and napkins may have been used there to demonstrate the ability of the young bride to make products of needlework.

A high degree of diversity is discerned as well. Longing for distinction, social display and luxury was the driving force. Groups or individuals showed a large diversification in their choices. Specific fabrics, garments, dining utensils, accessories and decorative features were of vital importance in striving for distinction.

Newly bought and new-made items accounted for a small percentage in the dowry, underlining its function as an intergenerational mechanism of transferring movables. At the same time, the 'new' items illustrated the adoption of a consumption mentality, visible in Italy and other European countries as well, by certain population groups (elite, eminent *cittadini*, artisans, urban population).

The non-elite followed an explicitly different pattern with brides receiving clothing items and bed furnishings more often. However, the outward homogeneity of the group diminishes significantly when the subtle details are closely observed. The three professional subgroups of artisans, priests and eminent *cittadini* demonstrate different behaviour.

Eminent *cittadini* (bureaucrats, doctors, pharmacists, rich merchants) enjoyed a higher social status than other non-elite members. They were capable to marry off their daughters with a 'rich' dowry. These 'new rich' tended to form a separate subgroup with its own identity. They possessed the highest number of new items with a large variety, including many of Venetian origin. They seemed obsessed with female appearance and with the desire to display affluent consumption behaviour. Consumption of specific items supported their wish to distinguish themselves and affiliate themselves with the upper social class of the elite. They appropriated, selectively, material items of the elite and followed the codes of *vivere civilmente*. Their driving force was social competition, their wish to materialise the accumulated wealth and acquired social status or their longing to express their refined taste. This is a pattern also traced in Venice and in other early modern European urban societies.

Artisans were better-off than other *popolani*. They could offer a more varied dowry with certain distinctive items due to their easy access to the production and distribution of material goods. The Greek Orthodox priests in the countryside distinguished themselves by deviating from the general pattern as their priorities lay, mostly, in cash and real estate, not in objects. Their minimal interest in prestige items and new commodities demonstrates a tendency far from the ostentatious display of eminent *cittadini*.

As a major transfer point, Candia played a key role in cultural exchange processes. Venice seemed to exercise a magnetic attraction on the inhabitants of the Mediterranean periphery. Specific types of objects, accessories, materials, decorative motifs and colours concerning the trousseaux and valuables are, selectively, adopted by certain social groups in Candia. Some items that were popular in Venice, such as shoes, fans and handkerchiefs, were not traced in the Cretan dowries. Other commodities were traced in Cretan dowries as often as in Venice. The culture of chests, forks and pearl necklaces connected Candia to Venice. Lace, a *hot item* in both geographical entities, had a similar impact on residents of both places. Moreover, lacemaking revealed the dominant female virtues (obedience, patience, restraint in the domestic sphere) and the economic and social standing of the brides. Other items from Venice were consumed in a different way in Crete. For instance, the mixed cloth *dimito*, the *indiana* cotton, the textile or (under)dress *fustagno/φουστάκι*. Inhabitants of Candia adopted Venetian fabrics and transformed their use according to their needs and sensitivities. The selective adoption of popular colours and the creation of new names and hues linked to the flora and export products of the island testify this.

Counterfeit products, a widespread practice in Venice, reached Candia as well. Mixed cloths of lower quality and price, thus, less durable and more sensitive to fashion changes, glass beads and substitutes of valuable pearls attested a timid appearance of consumerism. All offered a chance to less wealthy inhabitants to *feel* like the most privileged, contributing to a blurring of social boundaries.

Dotal objects created bonds and brought individuals and families together. At the same time, they separated them. Cultural elements were appropriated by different groups and were imbued with new meanings that became intertwined and continuously negotiated. The adoption of *brocadello* silk by the 'new rich' in Candia transformed the use of the fabric itself, but also, of the users. In Venice, it denoted the cheaper false silk brocade (*brocado*); in Candia, it was still a false *brocado*, but, at the same time, the distinctive silk, which offered the well-off non-elite the opportunity to distinguish themselves.

To summarise, this dissertation explores the socioeconomic and cultural function of the dowry movables and attempts to place Venetian Crete in the broader European context of material culture studies; in particular, of those which are based on probate inventory research. It demonstrates that

dowry played many roles, in Venetian Crete, through the divergent character of dowry goods: it was a mechanism of reception and seclusion; a means of separation and rapprochement; an embodiment of the taste and values of the families who endowed it. Dowry reflected and shaped the economic supremacy of the elite, the economic power and rising social status of eminent *cittadini*, and, the special position of artisans and priests. Moreover, this study highlights the living conditions of the non-elite group and the female population. Attention is, especially, drawn to women's life and the 'hidden' female lifestyle.

I looked closely at gowns and female accessories, touched their silk fabrics, got dazzled by the shine of pearls, jewels and silver glasses, felt the brightness of deep red colours and understood which objects were valuable for women. I trust that the methodological and theoretical framework outlined in this book will provide a starting point for further research on the material world of specific population groups in Venetian Crete.