

Cultural transfers and social ruptures in Venetian Crete: dowries of distinguished *cittadini* in seventeenth-century Candia

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This paper explores the material goods of dowries assigned to brides in seventeenth-century Candia (modern Heraklion). It focusses on the ones consumed by the upper segment of the middle social stratum of *cittadini* (citizens), i.e. doctors, pharmacists, secretaries, rich merchants and the like. The study is based on notarial records of the state archives of Venice consisting of 70 marriage agreements and inventories of movable property. This choice was partly prescribed by the fact that these primary sources have not been examined analytically on a broad scale, although they provide a tremendous amount of relevant information.¹ The investigated documents concern all social strata of Candia and were drawn up between 1600-1645 in order to determine and safeguard the dowry assigned.²

Aim of the investigation is to explore how the dowry movables expressed social ruptures or practices of cultural exchange³ and rapprochement. In order to reach this aim, I examine systematically the material choices of eminent *cittadini* jointly with the phenomenon of *vivere civilmente*, i.e. the urban way of living. How did the choices of these people differentiate from those of other non elite members? How did these choices approach the ones of the elite? To what extent were there practices of appropriation, emulation or cultural exchange visible in these marital choices?

Differentiation and rapprochement occurred in many ways. In this brief account I will focus only on certain practices, cases, categories of material goods and items. Female clothing will, particularly, be presented, as this was the most important category of goods in the non elite dowries in Candia.

Before answering these questions, some information about the urban setting and the socioeconomic context to which this study refers is indispensable. Candia, the administrative, economic and cultural centre of Venetian Crete, formed the keystone of socioeconomic life on the island during the four centuries of Venetian dominion. The urban environment in Candia was organized according to the plan followed by Venice in all its colonies in Eastern Mediterranean; a plan wherein Venice served as an ideal model.⁴ Impressive administrative buildings and fortifications, mercantile facilities, public squares with fountains, water

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¹ For inventories of movables of *cittadini* in Venetian Candia see Δετοράκης 1990; Κωνσταντουδάκη, 121-126. For inventories of merchants elsewhere in the Greek world see Βλάμη 2009. Regarding the opportunities offered by this type of documents see Μαρκάκη 1998; Schuurman 1980.

² The sample used was selected from a database of 770 marital documents spanning throughout the first half of the seventeenth century (1600-1645). These documents were traced in the archive *Notai di Candia* after examining a large number of notarial files according to the inventory Tiepolo 1991. It is a *purposive sample*, i.e. a targeted subset of the database. It consists of marital documents which offer a complete picture of the position and the value of the movables within the total amount of the assigned dowry. The inclusion criteria were the following: 1) provision of a complete picture regarding the dowry movables; 2) reference to parties living in Candia; 3) representation of the two examined social groups (elite and non elite) according to their demographic presence (approximately 5% elite, 95% non elite); 4) drawn up by various notaries active in Candia; 5) written in both available languages: Greek and Italian.

³ On the definition and use of the term *cultural exchange* and its differentiation from the term *cultural transfer* see Roeck 2007, 2-4.

⁴ On the development of urban space in Crete and other Venetian colonies see Georgopoulou 2001, 1-73. On urban public buildings, infrastructure and private residencies on Crete see, indicatively, Στεριώτου 2010; Καρδαμίτση-Αδάμη 2010.

reservoirs, Latin churches and welfare facilities for the poorer population gave the urban setting a distinguished character and pointed out the priorities of the Venetian state.⁵

The society in Candia was a multiethnic and a polyglot one, given the fact that the approximately 17,000 – 20,000 inhabitants in this period⁶ were Catholic Venetians, Orthodox Greeks, Jews and foreigners, in particular, Italians. Candia witnessed an especially pronounced symbiosis between the two dominant communities, Venetians and Greeks as early as the fourteenth century.⁷ However, the disappearance of boundaries between different population groups was only partial. The ruling class of nobles, the middle social stratum (the so-called *cittadini*) and the lowest of *popolo* remained until the end of the Venetian dominion separate ones. The legal position of the upper class (the elite) was strictly defined, while that of the other strata, only vaguely outlined. This bipolar structure of the Cretan society (elite and non elite) is disclosed in the notarial records.⁸ The strictly and accurately defined phraseology used for nobles reflects their explicit juridical condition, power and social prestige. On the contrary, the *cittadini* and *popolani* are registered with ambiguous terminology, reflecting their undefined and fluid condition.⁹

The ambiguity in the definition of middle and low urban social strata does not mean that no borderline existed between them.¹⁰ The stratum of *cittadini* consisted of a wide range of professionals with a broad scope of economic activities and one common feature, which differentiated them from the *popolo*: none of them was engaged in manual work. By focusing on a profitable and prestigious profession, they could create opportunities to acquire a higher social status. Thus, there were notaries and secretaries in the Venetian chancellery, feudatories without noble title, lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, army officials, clergy members and distinguished artists who enjoyed social prestige.¹¹ These individuals formed the upper segment of *cittadini*. These mostly atypical hierarchies within the group of *cittadini* were reflected in certain designations used in notarial acts, such as *eccellente miser/εκλεκτός μισέρ*.¹² The high economic status these *cittadini* gradually acquired did not go hand in hand with their legal position, which remained often inferior to that of nobles.¹³

This discrepancy must have been the starting point of the stride of some distinguished *cittadini* for appropriation of certain elements of the noble lifestyle. What was exactly this lifestyle? Norbert Elias had already noted in 1939 about the Middle Ages that “there was a standard of ‘good behaviour’ through which the secular upper class, or at least some of its leading groups, gave expression to their self-image, to what, in their own estimation, made them exceptional.”¹⁴ Moving our research to Venice, we should consider the following citations: “the elite families used display to assert, establish or maintain social prominence”¹⁵; “noble lifestyle was possible for whoever could afford it”¹⁶; “showing that one was able to maintain a luxurious lifestyle contributed to keeping up a good reputation.”¹⁷

⁵ See Georgopoulou 2001, 41; Στεριώτου 2010, 433-447; Κωνσταντινίδου 2010.

⁶ Παπαδία-Λάλα 2010, 107-108; Vincent 2007, 23.

⁷ Georgopoulou 2001, 10-11.

⁸ See Lambrinos 2009, 183-185.

⁹ For the complete list of these designations see Lambrinos 2009, 189.

¹⁰ On the middle and lowest urban social group see, indicatively, Παπαδία-Λάλα 2010, 111, 121-122; Παπαδάκη 2010, 92-97.

¹¹ For the complete list of these social-professional categories see Lambrinos 2009, 189-190.

¹² For the complete list of these designations see Lambrinos 2009, 186.

¹³ For some exceptions to the rule, i.e. *cittadini* who succeeded in entering the Cretan nobility (*nobiltà cretese*), see Lambrinos 2014.

¹⁴ Elias 2000, 54-55.

¹⁵ Martin and Romano 2000, 16-17.

¹⁶ Brown 2005, 254.

¹⁷ Gelder 2007, 164.

“Venetian *cittadini* were eager to emphasize their status within society by the same means as nobles...”¹⁸

This occurred not only in Venice, but, also, in Crete.¹⁹ Nobles adopted a lifestyle with cultural connotations to Venetian lifestyle and a prominently urban character (*vivere civilmente*). Noteworthy aspects of this sophisticated way of living were the use of Loggia as meeting-point²⁰, the possession and display of weapons, books, objects of art or material goods obviously linked to the Venetian patriciate. Clothing, jewellery, furniture and ornamental household items of Cretan nobles referred to the lifestyle of the Venetian patriciate.

According to my investigation, the dowries assigned by eminent *cittadini*, included the highest number of new items, in comparison with other non elite dowries. New items, i.e. newly bought objects of a better condition and quality, were considered a symbol of prestige, in other early modern European societies as well. If we examine what kind of new items were assigned by distinguished *cittadini*, then another differentiation comes to light: the new items they transferred were very diverse, including a Venetian type of dress (*carpetta*), a Venetian type of blanket (*coltra*), pillow-cases, napkins, fashionable detached sleeves (*maneghe/manigota*), undershirts (*pokamiso, camicia*) and a type of (under)dress (*fistani*). Artisans, on the contrary, assigned only two types of new items (napkins and *fistani*) and priests only one (undershirts).

Another choice which shaped the longing of these persons to dissociate themselves from other non elite members was the relatively high *frequency* with which they transmitted clothes and jewellery.²¹ Their obsession with female appearance and display differentiated them substantially from their social companions. The female garments shaped a shared taste of nobles (elite) and wealthy *cittadini* (non elite) leading to uniformity, which gave the well-to-do ladies the chance to differentiate from other non elite women.²² This behaviour revealed disjunctions of social caste and economic class, which were visible in Venice as well. As Allerston notes,

“... Venetian *cittadini* were eager to emphasize their status within society by the same means as nobles. At the formal gathering to celebrate Giustina Freschi’s wedding in 1506, the bride was dressed in crimson velvet and wore ornate jewellery, the residence was extravagantly decorated and the family’s coat of arms was prominently displayed - all traditional noble practices.”²³

Paradoxically, the concern of this group of *cittadini* to store all these clothes was minimal. Although the majority of furniture in dowries in Candia was storage items, the ‘culture of chests’ was not familiar to this group. Venetian patriciate was explicitly partial to what Brown calls “instruments of orderliness”: multi-purpose containers, chests, cabinets, drawers, boxes for keeping jewellery, were all traced in patrician houses.²⁴ There was a whole world of highly specialized items with the lexicon expanding to distinguish between them. But the eminent *cittadini* in Candia did not show any familiarity with that. Also, the transmission of tablecloths and napkins, which implies a social dimension of food culture, proved to occur less often in comparison with other non elite members. Do these two findings reveal a tendency? Are they just accidental being biased by the examined cases? If they concern a tendency, does this mean that this group of *cittadini* did not consider the ‘standard’

¹⁸ Allerston 1998, 32.

¹⁹ On *vivere civilmente* see Papadia-Lala 2001 and Παπαδία-Λάλα 2010, 122-123. On the noble lifestyle in Renaissance Venice see Brown 2005, 53-89 wherein the importance of lifestyle in defining status is emphasized.

²⁰ Regarding the use of *Loggia* in Candia see Λαμπρινός 1998, 235-237.

²¹ By frequency it is referred here to the number of cases in which these categories of goods appeared.

²² See also the account of Zuanne Papadopoli in Vincent (ed.) 2007, 122-123.

²³ Allerston 1998, 32.

²⁴ Brown 2005, 100-111.

female virtues as important enough? These female virtues were, on the one hand, to organize things in the household and, on the other, to produce needlework; both were highly appreciated in Renaissance Venice.²⁵ Or, does this tendency mean that the lust for display transgressed any other social requisition? Further research should provide this answer.

If we focus on specific dowry items, then certain female garments, accessories and fabrics manifest evident influences from the Venetian dressing code. Their number is so extensive that it is impossible to present them in this brief survey. A separate publication is being prepared on this theme. Some noteworthy names are the *camissia*, *canevazzéta*, *carpéta*, *casso*, *centa/cintura*, *damasco*, *dimitto*, *traversa*, *vestura*, *zendal*, *zaberluccho*.²⁶ Only *vestura* and *centa* will be analysed here, because they are the most representative ones for our case.

A *vestura* in Venice exemplified the height of formal fashion and the zenith of the professional embroideress's skill. The term indicates a gown with skirt and bust, made of various materials and styles. It is documented in Venice during a long time-period from the fourteenth century up to the seventeenth.²⁷ The variety and luxury of this garment in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Venice is unquestionable. The style was perfectly suited for maximum display of wealth and art. Making such an item demonstrated often fine craftsmanship and an eye for decorative detail. When features, such as the material, colour and decoration motifs, are no longer in proportion with the functionality of the item, demonstrating a certain degree of workmanship and finishing touch, these features can transform an item into a 'luxury' good.²⁸ This was, indeed, the case with *vestura*. According to my investigation, it was considered by appraisers of the time as the most valuable dotal item in the town of Candia. This garment was the status symbol to possess for a bride in this location.²⁹ It was made by *brocadello* or brocade (*brocado*), both silk qualities used for highly ornamented pieces of clothing. Yet, the first fabric was less costly, because of the lower quality material and the different technique used, whereas *brocado* was woven with gold-gilt or silver-gilt thread and therefore more expensive.³⁰ The exclusive character of the Venetian brocades explains why these fabrics were much in request in Europe and why the merchants of silk were recorded as new members of the nobility in Libro D' Oro.³¹

Apparently, doctor Attarasio Priuli was well versed in the higher quality of *brocado*, when he married off his daughter Paulina on April 6, 1643; he bought her a *brocado* red *vestura* with detached sleeves (*maneghe*) and a long tail (*coda*), trimmed with various colourful floral designs and gold-gilt thread.³² This *vestura* was appraised at 272 *ducati candiotti*, i.e. approximately 2.300 perperi, a definitely not negligible value, when compared to that of a large house in Candia (2.000 perperi).³³ The Cretan *perpero* is used in the notarial acts together with a large variety of other coinage. For the sake of comparisons, I have converted all values to this unit of account, according to all information available by primary and secondary sources. Although this conversion requires caution, it is advisable, because

²⁵ Brown 2000, 314-315.

²⁶ See Vitali 1992, 111-118, 125, 127-128, 130-131, 136-138, 171, 173-175, 378-379, 422, 427-428, 431-432.

²⁷ Vitali 1992, 422.

²⁸ On similar observations about material goods in early modern Brussels see De Laet 2011, 34. With reference to luxury goods see Rittersma 2010.

²⁹ See also Καργιάβνη 2011/2012, 333. In the *libretto sive inventario* of 1647 of the noble Querina Barbarigo there are fifteen luxurious *vesture* mentioned among other dotal items.

³⁰ See the lemma's *brocadèli* and *brocado* in Vitali 1992, 72-78.

³¹ Pisetzky 1966, 443. The same appealed to merchants of wool, golden clothes, lace and ribbons.

³² Archivio di Stato di Venezia (henceforth ASV), Notai di Candia (notary Z. Protonotari), busta 222, libro 5 f. 311r. ["vestura una da donna di raso brocato nova fondi carnado con varii fiori de diversi collori con la sua coda e maneghe in tutto brazzi vinti quattro con una guarnition d'orro fodrata la coda di ormesin rosso con due balzzanelle estimato in tutto ducati candiotti 272"].

³³ See, for instance, ASV, Notai di Candia (notary M. Corogona), busta 42, libro, f. 113r -v, wherein two large houses are appraised at 4000 p.

perpero was a unit of account “of fundamental importance in the conceptual framework of local money”, which remained stable during the seventeenth century (1 *perpero* = 32 *soldini*).³⁴

Manetusca, daughter of pharmacist Zuanne Stathis, got married ten months later and received many *vesture* as well.³⁵ Despite the obvious attempt to emulate the lifestyle of nobles, the eminent *cittadini* Priuli and Stathis did not manage to reach the luxury level of the elite. The noble Marieta Melissinopoula, who married to the noble Zuanne Francesco Zen in 1630, received a *vestura*, appraised at the excessive amount of 6.700 p., an amount which was four times higher than the average value of this garment.³⁶ Marieta received this exquisitely embroidered dress, made of crimson silk and ornamented with gold- and silver-gilt thread, in an affluent dowry of almost 120.000 p. Whether this extraordinary value was due to the silk material, to its crimson colour, to the superb ornamentation, or to the economic power of bride’s father is not easy to say. All these features must have played a role. What is certain, is that crimson red suggested a luxury item, because the dyestuff used to make it, i.e. *chermisi*, was the most expensive dyestuff and was never wasted on inferior cloth. In fifteenth-century Florence it was used only for silk velvets, damasks and the best-quality woolen fabrics.³⁷

Zuanne Melissino, Marieta’s father, wished, presumably, to show his economic power. To do so, he did not only assign a ‘rich’ dowry, but also luxurious and expensive items, which were used by the Venetian elite in the metropolis. He appropriated material symbols of a different geographical setting, just like Priuli and Stathis appropriated material symbols of a different social group. In both cases the process concerned emulation of a hierarchically higher group. In the last case, the process led to the visual blurring of social boundaries, something which could generate fears among the elite. During this process people could be motivated by a spirit of social competition, but, also, by the desire to express lucidly their personal taste, as was the case in similar processes in early modern Brussels, for instance.³⁸ The thriving middle social strata, there, threatened the social order by transcending the boundaries of their social group through the appropriation of consumption goods, which appertained the upper class. This is one of the reasons why sumptuary legislation was so widespread in Europe.³⁹ Brussels, Venice, Florence are some representative examples of cities where this kind of legislation was a mechanism to validate the social system by distinguishing one class from another.⁴⁰ In real terms, this legislation proved to be an exercise in futility.

The fact that the highest quality of silk (*brocado*) was rarely used, indicates the refined taste and exceptional position of doctor Priuli, who chose this quality. At the same time, it reveals the hierarchical relationship between colony and metropolis: in Venice the use of the more luxurious *brocado* was more common than in Candia. On the other hand, the use of *brocadello* fabrics, a definitely Venetian speciality,⁴¹ attests the degree of cultural exchange between Crete and Venice. The same is expressed by the use of other Venetian types of silk, such as the *damask*, i.e. a monochrome figured textile with a satin weave, the *canevazetta*, i.e. a variant of *broccato* in seventeenth-century Venice, and the *ormesin*. Many of them, were prohibited in Venice by sumptuary law due to their highly luxurious character.⁴² The presence of silk was unambiguously a differentiating factor between ‘rich’ dowries (mostly assigned by

³⁴ Vincent 2007, 31. On the *perpero* in the later period see pages 29-40. In this period its rate of exchange with the *ducato cretese* is fixed: 1 *ducato cretese/candioto* = 8 *perperi* and 12 *soldini*.

³⁵ ASV, Notai di Candia (notary Z. Protonotari), busta 223, libro 6, f. 129v-132r.

³⁶ ASV, Notai di Candia (notary G. Cortesan) busta 61, prot. XVII, f. 206v - 209r.

³⁷ Frick 2002, 101.

³⁸ See de Laet 2011, 155-159.

³⁹ For a historical overview see de Laet 2011, 159, note 112.

⁴⁰ Especially for Venice see Brown 2000, 319-329.

⁴¹ Vitali 1992, 72.

⁴² See, for instance, Vitali 1992, 125, 373 with regard to the prohibition of five qualities of silk (*canevazetta*, *tabi*, *brocado*, *veludo*, *raso*).

nobles and wealthy *cittadini*) and the rest. The difference in Candia was traced mostly in the quantity of silk items.

Another object identified with luxury and display in the examined dowries was *centa*⁴³, a belt, which was one of the most prized luxury commodities even in Venice itself. Accessories, which acquired a new importance from the beginning of the sixteenth century in Italy, mitigated the rigidity of clothes. The average value of a *centa* in Crete was 3.000 perperi, but a gold one, was appraised in 1604 at the exorbitant amount of almost 4.400 perperi. It was given by doctor Francesco Basichi to his daughter, who married the feudal lord Filippo Sirigo.⁴⁴ Francesco could not resist the temptation to display his wealth by endowing his daughter with a Venetian object, that, according to Bistort, “lended itself pre-eminently to the longing for luxury.”⁴⁵ Marrying with a member of the elite would have played a role in this decision, as well. Although belts could be functional as well, as they were seen as a sort of substitute for pockets, their ornamental use was unquestionable. They could be small masterpieces of artistic workmanship in Italy and in Crete as well. This was especially the case when they were ornamented with lace, precious stones, silver and gold.

Fashionable clothing items and accessories were traced in the dowries of other eminent *cittadini* as well. Pharmacist Zuanne Stathis provided his daughter with five relatively expensive and lavishly decorated undershirts⁴⁶ and an ornamented handkerchief (*faciol da viso*). Undershirts (*camise*), lavishly ornamented, was the most popular piece of linen in Venice in this period.⁴⁷ The *faciol/faziòl/fazuòl*, widely used in Venice in this period for various purposes, formed a fashionable female accessory, mostly made of fine silk.⁴⁸ It's use suggested a definitely refined way of behaviour.

The same dowry reveals more interesting findings: the bride received one very expensive tablecloth in the fine linen quality *tela deregna*. This quality was used almost exclusively to make table linen, particularly, in ‘rich’ dowries. She also received two clothes for covering storage furniture, as was the custom in Venice (*mantil stretto di credenza*) and a set of twenty four napkins. Obviously, her father was interested in keeping up with the elite diner etiquette: nobles always assigned a set of twenty four napkins made of a fine quality fabric. Yet, this pharmacist did not emulate other significant elite symbols, such as the linen quality *renso*, a valuable white fine linen cloth of French origin, used in Candia exclusively in ‘rich’, elite dowries.⁴⁹

Summarizing this survey, it should be pointed out that by appropriating material symbols of the elite, eminent *cittadini* attempted to reach nobility and to make evident that they ‘belonged’ to the upper social class. By closing the gap between their non elite status and the status of nobles, they generated a new gap between them and other non elite members (artisans, clergy, small merchants, etc.). Dotal female garments and accessories in Candia revealed someone's social prestige or affluence just like the 13th-century golden and crystal spoons or the 17th-century furnishings of a Venetian *portego*. And they attest what social anthropologists Douglas and Isherwood pointed out in 1979 already: “although goods are neutral, their uses are social: they can be used as fences or bridges.”⁵⁰

Dowry, therefore, proved to be a “vehicle of differentiation and identification” in a town which remained, until the end of the Venetian dominion, a place of converging and diverging

⁴³ *Cento, cinto, cintura*. See Vitali 1992, 136-138.

⁴⁴ ASV, Notai di Candia (notary D. Gavrilli), busta 129, atti, f. 31r -33r + 36r -v.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Vitali 1992, 138. See also Vitali 1992, 136-138; Pisetzky 1966, 419.

⁴⁶ Notai di Candia (notary Z. Protonotari), busta 223, libro 6, f. 129v-132r. See also Καραγιάννη 2011/2012: 334.

⁴⁷ For a detailed chronological account concerning the use of this type of underwear see Vitali 1992, 111-118.

⁴⁸ See Vitali 1992, 187.

⁴⁹ For its use in Venice see Vitali 1992, 322-323.

⁵⁰ Douglas and Isherwood 1979, 37.

communities with ever-shifting boundaries, reflecting in this way the fluid and ever-changing context of Venice.⁵¹

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