

# TIMELESS PEOPLE



## IN A CHANGING TIME

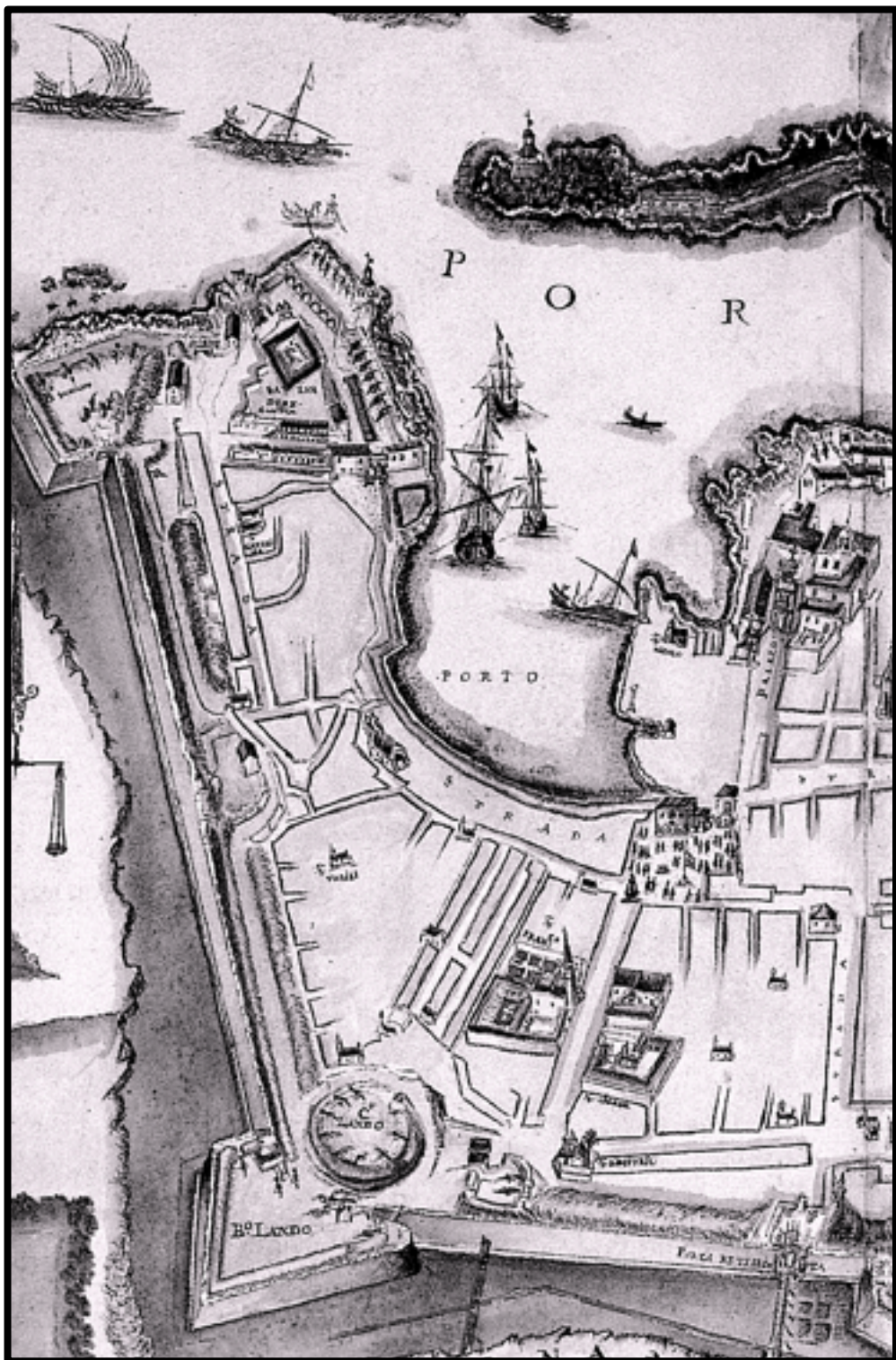


HAS THIRTY YEARS OF TOURISM CHANGED  
4,000 YEARS OF CRETAN TRADITION?

*Douglas Bullis*

TIMELESS PEOPLE  
IN A CHANGING TIME





*Port of Canea in its Venetian heyday, c. 1600. Several of the*





*original seventeen Arsenale dry docks are still used today*

# TIMELESS PEOPLE IN A CHANGING TIME

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DOUGLAS BULLIS



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## INTRODUCTION

What is the 'real' Crete? This island with its distinctive elongated profile is renowned for its mythic Minoan civilisation; its long-lived, hardy, and feisty people; its Mediterranean Diet so beloved of nutritionists and cookbook writers. Crete is famed for its tourist attractions of rugged mountains, balmy beaches, and picturesque seaports. The island's history is so multicultural, and diverse that it is one of academia's most reliable wellsprings of theses and research papers.

But are those the 'real' Crete? If not, what IS the 'real' Crete?

Is it the mythical Crete, the birthplace of Zeus, the land of the Minotaur trapped and killed in the Labyrinth, and Mount Dikte, haunt of Olympian gods and roaming mystical beasts?

That image of Crete fell by the wayside as the myths faded into obscurity and the archaeological facts came out. The Renaissance mystique of Diana the Huntress so beloved of painters through the ages that it is difficult to find a big-name museum in Europe without her portrait, is an example of a mythic image that can be traced to a real person. Diana was no huntress with a bow and arrow, she was a real Cretan woman named Diktyнна, whose shrine on the Rhodóπου Peninsula was the most famous spiritual sanctuary in the Mediterranean from Mycenaean times to the end of the Roman Empire. Diktyнна devised the net to snare wild animals for food instead of violently beating them to death with sticks and spears as the men did. 'Bring 'em back alive' has real meaning in Cretan lore. In so doing she bequeathed us a word so obvious that it is astonishing how rarely it is used: gatheress. Why should a woman who provided food be called a huntress?

Is the 'real' Crete the mediagenic mountain-and-seaport tourist magnet fabled for its quayside cafes, memory-making balcony views over harbours, quaint Venetian towns filled with narrow lanes lined with restaurants and trinket shops? Or is it the island's fabulous hiking, deep chasms, scent of wild herbs, the jangling of sheep bells on grassy slopes; its round-domed whitewashed chapels that dot the countryside; its mammoth mountains and cove-crammed seacoast?

Is the 'real' Crete the longest continuously inhabited island populated with its own unique civilisation? Or is it the agricultural hothouse that has provisioned the millennia with olives, honey, and tomatoes ever since the first Minoan boats sailed to Egypt 3800 years ago, and continues into our own time as the island's south-east agricultural breadbasket of endless polytent hothouses producing a fifth of the Common Market's vegetables? Is it the Crete of modern scientific research, producing original research papers and studies in astronomy, archaeology, botany, soils science, drip irrigation, geology, fishery management, and much else?

Is the 'real' Crete the Minoan women whose iconic seven-flounced skirts benchmark the origin of the sewn and structured garment as we know it today? While the rest of the women around the Mediterranean made do with variations of the wrapped rectangular cloth we know mainly by way of the toga, Minoan women strode like a parade of bouquets.

In truth, Crete is all of these. But in this recital of what Crete's civilisation looks like in fragments, there is one glaring omission: *the people*.

Who are the Cretan people—or as they refer to themselves, *Kritis*? What do they do all day long? What do they think about each other, the mainland Greeks, the hoards of summer tourists, and their futures in an era fraught with looming environmental disasters like rising sea levels that will remorselessly wreak havoc on the island's seaports and employment opportunities?

Is there a generation gap between the Zorba the Greek image and today's young professionals who shun the mythic Crete in favour of advanced degrees in Athens and abroad?

The panoply herein makes for entertaining reading, but it cannot communicate a sense for the actual experience of Crete—the smells, the sights, the unveiled facial expressions that reveal the inner person, how children play, how elders walk, how some people cheerily delude themselves while others put up with the disappointments of seeing life all too clearly.

There is only one way to learn about the Cretan people as they are to themselves: go there and spend six months talking to everyone you can. People on paper aren't nearly as interesting as the ones in front of you.

Alternatively, you can read this book. Keep in mind, though, that as vivid as the images in this tale may be, they are a pallid facsimile of everyday life across the span of an hour. I have visited Crete numerous times over the past twenty-odd years. So beguiled by the people was I that he married a woman whose mother was from Chania, the island's second largest city and most popular tourist destination—which also happens to be the centrepiece of this book.

Even so, as the character Mihalis put it to me at one point in our friendship, 'Dooglahs, maybe in three thousand years you can become an apprentice Kriti.'

Life would be pretty dull without friends like him.

## BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR, 1981-2021

50 West Coast Artists: A Critical Selection, with Henry Hopkins  
California Fashion Designers: Art and Style  
Crystals: the Science, Mystery and Lore  
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## ASTRONOMY

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The Winds of Change are Blowing Over Aquila  
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## Meeting Mihalis

‘Why you staying in Kriti so long time?’ a voice hailed to me as I walked past a door. ‘Two weeks, every day you walk by here.’

I looked beyond the open door. The room was almost filled by a loom. A man was sitting on the other side of a maze of bobbins and yarn that looked like a three-dimensional grand piano painted in fuchsia, pimiento, and cinnamon.

‘I like it here,’ I replied. ‘I can walk for hours and never see the same view twice.’

‘The *πασαρέλες*, *paserelles*, the passing birds, they like it, too. They don’t stay two weeks like you. The *paserelles* come, eat, look, buy. Take nice pictures. Make pretty chirps how nice Kriti is. Then three days later, *ppfft*, on to the next place. They don’t stay two weeks.’

I’d briefly glanced at his open door before on my way up or down the *Odos Zampeliou*, *Οδός Ζαμπελιού*, the ‘Street to the Spring,’ whose name was given back in Chania’s Turkish days. Now I looked more closely at the man behind the loom. Tight curls, narrow chin for the size of his face. Thirty-fivish according to the creases in his eyes; forty-fivish as edited by the salt-and-pepper of his hair. He always sat in the same place with the same concentrated look on his face as he worked his loom in what was once the anteroom of an old Venetian townhouse. Always bathed in the same flat, dim, shadowless light of his shop. I would hear the *bzzzzp-thump-thump* of his loom from the rooftop terrace of the Nostos Hotel across the street where I was staying until I found a long-term rental.

His rhythm was as metronomic as the shuttle going back and forth between the threads of his carpets-to-be. The *bzzzzp* of the

shuttle encoded the pattern, the double *thump* clenched the loom's array of multi-hued threads into a carpet that would last for decades. A fleeting hypothesis surfaced in which the pace and the regularity of working a loom might have been set by the rhythm of the weaver's heartbeat. I slipped a notebook out of my shirt pocket, jotted a reminder to look up work habits before the age of clocks. The man regarded me as I did so. He stopped his weaving and looked me up and down.

'Lots of people think Chania, Χανιά is a nice town,' he continued. He leaned forward, intent on removing a scraggly hair from one of the weft threads. He held the strand up for me to see. His look was something Queen Victoria might have reserved for news of an unfortunate pregnancy down in the maid's quarters.

'You see this?' he said. 'We call this "dog-hair", even though it comes from the sheep. For some reason dog-hairs don't take colour and refuse to weave with the rest of the fibres. These are why you itch when you sleep in a machine-woven blanket.'

He glanced at me through the meshy maze of his loom. Yarns and bobbins angled into each other in pastel pink and apricot and mauve. His smile—indeed, his eyes, his forehead wrinkles, his lips, maybe even his mind



—had a permanently bemused look to them, as though seriousness was too silly to take seriously.

‘But you,’ he veered back to me, ‘two weeks now you pass my door. No camera. No Bermuda shorts. No free map from Kriti Gold Shop. You’re not one of the *πασαρέλες*, the *paserelles*. So why are you here?’

‘I came to learn about olives.’

His eyes blinked several times. ‘*Olives?*’ he said, seemingly dumbfounded. ‘Ελιός?’

He opened his arms into a wide arc spanning everything before him. ‘My friend, this is Kriti! The *whole island* is olive trees! Take a walk and in one hour you will see the entire history of *ελιά*, the olive, right there before your very eyes. If you stay longer, you either got a girlfriend or you’re a slow learner.’

‘I look at the world as if I’m seeing it for the first time. After that, anything is better than what I had before.’

‘Ayoooh!’ he laughed with a mix of a sigh in it, ‘I wish more people would admit they know nothing.’

He went back to his loom. The rhythmic certainty of the loom’s *bzzzzp-thump-thump* was the only advertisement of his craft to the strollers dawdling their way up and down Odos Zampeliou. There was no sign on the door, no posters on the wall. Odos





Zampeliou, like most of Χαγιά's old-town streets, was too narrow for Fiat Topolino but wide enough to accommodate a pram for twins. The lane stair-stepped its way downhill between muted yellows and oranges from the high walls of the Cavalierotto Santa Catherina bastion at its western end, descending to near sea-level by the time it joined the Chalidon Fountain two hundred metres away.

Even at its narrowest, the οδός never lacked for eye candy. A Lot-to-ticket seller made his rudderless rounds among the tables of a street-side cafe. People revealed themselves in glimpses, self-conscious primping of their hair, wiggling their flip-flops with their toes as they sat for a snack, tattered cut-offs revealing ballerina-slim calves. One young man accessoried his hair like an electrocuted broom. Wearing black pants, black belt, tight black shirt, black shoes, all were made elegant by his single gold earring. The harbour in the distance was like trembling glass. A family ordered a snack—husband beer, wife tea, boy ice cream sundae with extra almonds and extra honey and extra chocolate. A trumpet solo coming from an upper-floor window sounded like Wynton Marsalis at the bottom of Atlantis. A GI parade of bad haircuts from the nearby military installation. A huge mound of popcorn leading around a five-year-old who resolutely nibbled just one piece at a time. Tables were polka-dotted with pistachio shells.

I looked up and noticed a sign jutting from above the weaver's door. It was a weathered block of wood with the letters ROKA carved deeply into it.

'What's a roka?' I asked him.

'Eh?' The flat falsetto pitch of the sound made me think he had spent some time in Canada.

'What is a roka? Your shop is named ROKA. So what is a roka?'

He sighed as though he had heard this question too many times before.



‘Ρόκα is the name of a flower pod that grows in the hills around Χαλιιά. It has pale-yellow blossoms on a stem about a metre high. When the petals fall off, they leave a two-pronged stick that is perfect to hold raw wool. In old postcard pictures of women spinning yarn, look closely. See how they draw the fibres from a ρόκα with just their fingertips. In the old days women with dainty fingers were famous for the thin yarns they could pull.’

He sighed again, a long slow exhale that sounded like resignation.

'The old postcards are the only place you see the ρόκα any more,' he continued. 'A ball of raw wool in a ρόκα is where Cretan weaving began. But everybody buys machine-spun now. Weaving is cheaper with machine-spun, but it is so boring. Σαμά-σαμά, *sama-sama*, same-same. Where's the fun in that?'

'So ... your yarn had a doghair in it because you make your own yarns?'

'You are inquisitive, my friend! Are you sure you are here just to look at ελιά trees?'

'If you weave all day and spin all night, when do you sleep?'

'My γιαγιά, my grandmother, spins my yarns.' He gestured in the direction of two large wooden bins. They were heaped with lozenge-shaped bobbins wound with yarns in dozens of colours. I looked carefully. None of the hues had the saturated intensity of chemical dyes.

'We are Kritis. Every family member does what they can. My *yi-ayιά* can hardly walk, but her fingers are as nimble as a girl's. Our roka has been in the family four generations.'

He wandered off into his thoughts for a few moments, then looked back at me.

'Where you from?'

'South Africa.'

His eyebrows shot up and he seemed to see right through me. 'You don't talk South African. You said, "Yes". South Africans say, "Yeyuss". You sound American. You said, "actually", not "ectually". Even American James Bond stars know to say "ectually".'

'I was born in the USA but I married a South African. Before I met her my home was Asia. India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore.'

'If you live so many years in so many countries, where's "home"?''

'I have a mind full of memories instead of a house full of stuff. All those people and their ways of living—I learned there is a little

bit of everyone in me, and a little bit of me in everyone. Then I met my wife. All the little bits of everyone in my life suddenly lined up and coalesced into her.'

From his look, I might as well have been talking about palaeontology.

'What's your name?' I asked.

'Mihalis. My grandfather was named Mihalis, so I am named Mihalis. The names of our grandparents are how most Kriti boys and girls get our names. What is your name?'

'Douglas. But from the day I first heard it and knew that it meant me, I never liked it. When people called me 'Doug', I imagined a hole in the ground with a pile of dirt around it. When they called me 'Douglas', I thought I should be wearing a kilt and blowing on bagpipes. My African friends can't say 'Douglas' very well. It comes out 'Dooglahs'. I've gotten so used to it I ask everybody to use it.'

'All the same, you're not here to ask what a *qóka* is. You must be doing something else.'

'I am writing a book.'

'You writing the first novel about olives?' he grinned. 'What a good idea! Even we Kritis haven't thought of that!'

'I couldn't write a novel if my life depended on it.'

He seemed relieved. 'Good! Even great Kazantzakis could not capture we Kritis. All his words, so beautiful and telling so much the truth, and still he got only the outside of us. So what kind of book is your book?'

'I don't know yet. I'll find out by talking with people like you.'

There came an upward lilt to the edges of his lips and eyes, and his eyes wouldn't contact mine. He's holding down a laugh, I realised, setting me up for some kind of punch line.

'So when will you start telling us all about we Kritis? Everybody is sure to be waiting on the edge of their chairs.'

'Maybe a year. Maybe two.'





‘Maybe never, Dooglahs. Let me tell you something. Χανιά, this very city where we are talking, is the oldest city in Europe. Eight thousand years old, some of the pots they found here. For three thousand years people have used we Kritis as steppingstones—the Mycenaeans, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Byzantines, the Venetians, the Christians, the Turks, the Nazis, and now the tour operators. But my friend, we are Kritis. Nobody is a Kriti but a Kriti. The rest of the world is a little further away. Many thousands of kilometres, in fact.’

I realised that I was blocking the view of the tourists who might come in. Odos Zampeliou is one of the more heavily touristed streets in Χανιά. In the back of my mind I was aware that several couples already had stopped momentarily and then gone on.

‘Sit down, sit down,’ Mihalis motioned to me. There was a long divan-like bench facing his loom so people could sit and talk or watch him work. Its cushions were covered from end to end with a blanket. The taupe and mauve and tangerine-orange in it reinforced my impression that this was a weaver whose dyes were natural plant colours.

A couple entered, Dutch from the sound of their frogpond-at-dawn locutions. They looked at the loom without looking at the room full of carpets, then left.

I traced a thread in the blanket with a finger.

‘I see that you dye your wool using vegetable colours.’

His eyes darted up into mine.

‘How did you know that?’ he replied. ‘Most people don’t notice such things.’

I looked around the huge, almost cavernous, interior. Carpets were everywhere—hung like paintings on the walls, draped over the few items of furniture. Skyscrapers of carpets lofted around the support pillars. Geometrics, zigzags, chevrons, linear patterns and arabesques, and not one with the blue leaping dolphins that most people associate with Cretan tourist carpets. Instead, there were round folds of deep crimsons, more versions of red than one could dream possible, faded yellows, ficus-leaf greens, browns. A ghostly raspberry colour invited a closer inspection. I went to the carpet and examined it. Its colour was as though all of the black had been



removed from a ripe berry, leaving behind an almost evanescent hue of purple and pink.

I replied, 'Your colours are not aniline dyes. Aniline dyes are permanent. They bond to the fibres chemically. They don't fade in the sun. Compared with your colours, chemical dyes are bright, bold, and blotchy. They have no nuance, no subtlety, no life. Your colours reveal the delicacy of the plants they come from.'

His eyebrows furrowed as he looked at me with curiosity. 'Not many people know that,' he muttered. 'Vegetable colours are actually tints. A tint lies on the surface of a fibre, it does not bond to it. Tints wash away if you use anything but olive oil soap. And, they are bleached by the sun. Tints change with time and circumstances, like us.'

He went back to his weaving. The pace of the *bzzzzp-thump-thump* was slower, measured, more deliberate.





‘You put together wonderfully subtle colour combinations,’ I admired. ‘I can’t imagine how you made this ghost-of-raspberry colour.’

‘I dug up the roots I use for that colour after the last freeze but before the first rains. It is the only time of year I can get that colour.’

I was distracted by a whiff of roasting lamb and missed the import of that fact. Χαλιά was gearing up for the lunch crowd. This part of the Topanas

or old Venetian quarter was now the city’s main *taverna* and dining district. I often wondered if there was some kind of a civil ordinance mandating that ‘Real Cretan Cooking’ be painted in big letters on the spraddle-legged menu boards that phalanxed every street.

I was falling in love with these streets. The infatuation had started with blue-and-white-checked table cloths, then proceeded to piecrust-textured walls of ochre and tan, doors and urns of deep blue, and every imaginable container turned into a flowerpot. Smells of garlic and bread, vinegar and yeast. Limpid late afternoons from sea-thick humidity. The luminous sunsets from the cafes lining Χαλιά’s amphora shaped harbour. The lucid sea. The lamenting bar songs about love lost, love gained, and love never found. Each night’s last taste of tea.

The *bzzzzp-thump-thump* of Mihalis’s loom elbowed its way into my reverie.

‘Out of a hundred people who walk in, how many buy a carpet?’  
I ventured.

‘Zero.’

‘Out of five hundred visitors?’

‘Maybe one.’

Mihalis grunted as he bent forward to pull out another doghair.

‘The Internet changed my life. I get more orders from *Chaniaguide* in a week than I would get in a month before the 1990s. In old days young women had to weave their own carpets for their dowries. Girls learned the loom starting when they were seven or eight, sitting alongside their mothers.



‘Their first designs were simple patterns for pillows used on the hard chairs at the food table. The designs gradually became more complex until she learned that she was to be married. Her last piece on her mother’s loom was a handbag. She would carry that handbag for the rest of her life, so she put every bit of her skill and knowledge into it. Many women were so attached to their hand-



bags that they took them to the grave when they died. That's why they are such rarities in the museums now.'

'Mihalis, when you said, "She learned she was to be married", does that mean the marriages were arranged? Didn't the young women have any voice in the matter?'

He laughed. 'Dooglahs, you have much to learn. You must find a nice wife here and settle in. Maybe in one thousand years you can become apprentice Kriti.'

I must have blushed because the laugh-lines in his eyes were on high beam. I tried to cover over my cluelessness with a bit of know-it-all pomposity. 'In Asia, many marriages are arranged by marriage brokers. Families want to bond themselves with other families, especially richer and more powerful families. It used to be that some couples didn't know who their life partners were going to be until they met at the temple or church. I used to read the classified ads placed by marriage brokers. Prospective brides and grooms

were listed in order of their social class or caste, then their horoscope, then whether they had a job, and finally by the size of their dowry. No pictures, just numbers. Parents with marriage-age daughters ....'



He waved his hands in the classic 'Stop!' gesture. 'Dooglahs, Kriti is not the rest of the world. Kriti is Kriti. In the old days—meaning until television came along—most Kritis lived in villages or hamlets. There weren't many brides or grooms to choose from, but there were a lot of hamlets in the valleys where the farm land was the best. Villages stayed small to spare the land. Mothers wanted their married daughters close to them, and the daughters wanted to be close to their mothers. So the mothers would get together and choose their daughter's best candidates for husband. The daughter got to say which one was for her. Most of the time the couples already knew each other. If the prospective husbands were recommended by family members far away, they sent pictures, then letters.'

He looked up at me to see if I was still listening. I had the feeling not many people were all that interested in the details of local lore.





<https://aromalefkadas.gr/>

‘The looms in those days—like mine here—were family heir-looms. Literally, heir-looms. I wonder if that is where the word came from.’

I pulled out my cell phone to look up the etymology of “heirloom”. He seemed surprised that I should have such a thing.

‘Yes and no,’ I informed him. ‘The word ‘loom’ originally meant “tool”. The article doesn’t say how it came to mean the apparatus you have.’

‘In Greek a loom is *argaleiós*, αργαλειός. In the old days, αργαλειός were used only in the winter when there was no farming to do. The *argaleiós* had to be packed away the rest of the year. The old family *argaleiós* used hand shuttles, which meant the carpets could be only as wide as the woman’s arm span. Dowry carpets were for the furniture. Floor carpets were made by trade weavers whose looms were built for the room where they would be used. Like mine. No two weaving rooms were the same size, so there were no

standard carpets in those days. The weavers were mostly young girls or older women whose children had gone. Before the flying shuttle came along, large looms were worked by two women sitting side by side. The flying shuttle changed everything. It meant only one woman was needed. The other woman could then do the rest of the chores like gathering the plants needed for colour, boiling the vats to fix the colours, winding the bobbins, feeding the family. That meant they could also weave through the summer. Women who could weave all day could produce twice as many carpets. For the first time women could earn as much money as the men. That changed everything. One of those things was that the women took control of the house. I learned how to weave from my γιαγιά. This is her loom.'

I examined it more fully. The rectangular floor frame was solid oak timbers larger than my handspan. They had been fitted together with notched cuts and mortise-tenons. Not a bit of metal to be seen. His seat was deep into the room but faced outward so he could see the street. Between the loom and the window were baskets filled with yarns of the colours used on the carpet he was working on. I counted eight in the murky light.

'So how is the weaving life for you?' I asked.

He brightened at that. 'Before the Internet, during the winter I had to work as a handyman or go out with the fishing boats to make ends meet. I hated going out to sea in the winter. The boats were so small and the sea is so big. Winter storms killed a lot of fishers at sea. They would go out and never return. I was always so afraid when I was out there. Today everything is different, all thanks to the Internet and people like you who can come to visit Kriti. These days it takes me all winter to fill the summertime orders. Some of those people who seem to just come in and look go home and take measurements. Then they order by email from my web page on *Chaniaguide*. I'm so busy I don't need a website. More and more people want custom designs now. They send me sketches and choose the colours of the yarn from my online swatch-book. I

cut *lousos* of the yarns they want from the bobbins and tape them to their order. *Lousos* means 'swatch.' I get orders from California, Belgium, England, Germany, the Netherlands. After the middle of September when the tourists trade slows down, I work on the order book.'

I looked at Mihalis and realised that not once in all my passings had I seen him take a break from his wicker chair in front of the loom, from nine in the morning till seven at night.

'I get enough business from the tourists and local trade,' he continued, 'so we live well. My wife Anya and I go on holidays every year. We have a car. We eat roast lamb and fresh olives and put fresh feta on our salads. We live on Kriti and nothing could be better than that. Your writer friends go home and call this idyllic. They don't have to work ten hours a day making carpets.'

'There are people who think writers plop a cat on their lap in the morning, stare out the window till three, peck a few lines, and *pouf*, royalty checks show up and they get invited to book signings. Well, maybe. But I work ten hours a day in front of a laptop. If I don't do that, I can't come to Kriti and look at carpets.'

A door opened in the rear of the shop. A woman entered. Willowy, slim, blondish. Skin so lucent that her no-make-up looked better than make-up.

'Dooglahs, this is Anya,' Mihalis said.

She extended her hand. It seemed so small and doll-like that I instinctively greeted her using the gracious Malay greeting of placing my palms softly on either side of her hand, then sliding them away and putting my fingertips to my heart.

'I heard you asking a lot of questions,' she said.

If German was music, her's was Mozart.

'It keeps people from asking them of me.'

They exchanged glances.

Anya might have appeared willowy, but her voice was suddenly as hard as iron. 'Why are you asking us so many questions?'

It dawned on me that she suspected I might be a knock-off artist, someone who pretends to examine a garment or weaving in order to copy the design, then mass-produce it elsewhere and claim it as their own.

'I am a writer. I write about the way people live, and why they choose to live that way.'

'I guess it is all right,' Mihalis said to her. 'He doesn't have the look of a *καλπικός*.'

'*καλπικός*?' I asked. 'What does *kalpikos* mean?'

'Pseudo, ψευδής. Fake. Untrustworthy. Take your pick.'

Anya touched his hand. 'Should we trust him?'

He avoided my eyes and was silent for a moment, seemingly nonplussed that someone was interested enough in him to record his words.

'Dooglahs, what do you need most in life?'

I was caught off guard by the question and blurted, 'The writing life is a suitcase and a laptop. I know that sounds glib, but it is true.'

'You are lucky to want so few things.'

'Then I ask you your own question.'

'Dooglahs, in the old days, when I was a boy, uncles always gave copper pans, pots, and spoons as presents to the new brides joining the family. Copper was like gold to us. Even more valuable, in fact, because we could use it every day. There was a trade in those days called the tinker—Gypsies mostly—whose job was to come around and shine everyone's copper. The really good tinkers knew to finish the job by burnishing it with a wad of damp straw. But then stainless steel and aluminium came and people stopped dowering with copper. Now the tinker trade is gone. Several years ago the last tinker went on television begging for someone to come and learn what he knew. But no one did. He pleaded, 'I will even give you all

my equipment,' but no one came. The last I heard, the government was going to put his tools in a museum.'

He sat back in his chair with his hands behind his head, staring out at the street. An eerie combination of indecision and anguish had come over his face. There was a downturn in his eyelids and his lips were pressed tightly together.

'Why did you go to Canada?' I asked.

There's nothing like a blindside question to move things along.

'Canada! But how did you know?'

'Your *'Eh!'*'

He laughed. 'Four years studying engineering in Toronto and I came close, but I never did get *'Eh!'* exactly right,' he said. But then his face fell and he averted his eyes.

'Those weren't good times for me.' His words sounded as voluntary as a visit to the dentist. 'I felt guilty all that time, knowing I was leaving my family. Leaving Roka. Leaving our whole way of life since before Turkish times.'

'Did you feel you were deserting your family?'

He took a long time to answer. When he did his eyes were wet. I felt uneasy. I'd forgotten how Mediterranean men can emote, show their feelings. I had grown so accustomed to men who didn't reveal their feelings that now I didn't know how to respond to a man who did.

'I felt like I was deserting not just my family, but my history. For a Kriti, that's losing our soul. But Dooglahs, what was there to do? Three of us children and only two family floors in the house. One of us had to go our own way. I chose me because I was old enough to make a living in a foreign country. But I also was the only one left who was interested in weaving. When I left, my mother was so heartbroken. We are weavers, Dooglahs! Weaving is the Kriti in us.'

He stopped, swallowed a couple of times, then regained himself. Anya touched her hand to his arm.

‘I suppose we should tell him,’ she said. The steel in her gaze had softened. ‘Perhaps he can help us.’

He cleared his throat and swallowed hard. I could see that he was dealing with emotions that he couldn’t easily articulate.

‘Dooglahs, my carpets are so beautiful—all the world wants them. I work many hours now when twenty years ago I worked only a few. But ... I am the last one. The only male weaver left in all of Kriti. *The whole island!* The women weavers still working are all older than me. Soon they will die—even now one of them has stopped weaving. When I go, it will be like the tinker. No one will want my life. My family have been weavers since before Turkish times. Four hundred years! And now ... now everything I know and live for will become a glass case in a museum.’

He turned to embrace with his eyes the huge room, filled with its hundred or more resplendent carpets, their colours from the roots of nature itself, the meticulous craft begun so early it was acquired alongside his A-B-Cs and 1-2-3s; the designs passed down through the nicks and crevices of dowries and localities until Crete became a vast texture of colour and shape and gradation, just as Mihalis’s carpets were textures of these things. This, the Crete that survived three thousand years of occupiers, whose gods were implanted so far back in its ancestry that no one now can name their millennium, this is what it had come to:

‘No Kriti wants my loom.’







**Travel guides and personal-experience books tell us about Crete. But how many of them tell us about the Cretan people?**

**Instead of reading about the sightseeing and food, meet the everyday Cretan people whose lives are not driven by tourism. Meet colourful characters, listen to their joys and worries, work alongside them at their jobs, dine with them in their cafes.**

**Laced with humour and wit, meet them and learn about their lives and their place in this land's 4,000-year history. Nobody can tell it like they can, so let's join in and listen.**



This is more than mere travelogue, more than sharp observation: Bullis all but lives the lives of Cretans, gets inside their crafts and conversations, deftly weaves in history and myth, and manages to be both contemporary and elegiac. ~Dan Wylie, poet, South Africa

Douglas Bullis's book is the best account of modern Crete I have ever come across. Crete is known mainly for Knossos, Theseus, and the Minotaur—the culture of the ancient Cretan people. Douglas Bullis has seized a golden opportunity to write about Crete's people living and working today. The Crete of the Minoan heroes is still alive in today's average weaver, shepherd, and cafe waiter. ~Bataaf Westerhuis, artist, Amsterdam



The weaver Mihalis and his wife Anja are more than heroes in this book. They are the hero all of us become if we dedicate our lives to increasing the beauty of the world. ~Giorgos Vardakis, Xania,

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