

1. Historical background

Cyprus is an island in the Eastern Mediterranean, on the threshold between the Orient and the Occident. Through the centuries it came under many and different masters, both from east and west, who left their mark on the local culture and also in the dress of its people. European influence was prevalent during the period of the Lusignan (1191-1489) and Venetian rule (1489-1570), and remained traceable through the three centuries-long Ottoman rule (1571-1878). Out of this period, during which oriental influence was stronger than ever before, emerged the traditional Cypriot dress of modern times.

The economy of the island was based on farming, stockbreeding and the trade of agricultural products. Most people lived in the countryside. Experiencing a closed, self-sufficient subsistence economy, the Cypriot peasants produced everything they needed in everyday life. They exploited local raw materials and manufactured their clothing with textiles woven on the loom, likewise they made their own bread from the cereals they cultivated. Raw materials for weaving, notably silk, cotton and linen, were among the main agricultural products of Cyprus. Wool was provided by sheep and goats, which were raised in great numbers. Linen was known from ancient times and silk production was introduced during the Byzantine period. Cotton was widely cultivated from the 14th to the mid-20th century; it was the chief natural product, reckoned the finest in the Levant, little inferior to that of the Indies.

Cyprus created a long tradition in textile production. Under the rule of the Lusignan dynasty (1191-1489), Nicosia and Famagusta had developed into important centres of manufacture of fine textiles, such as silk fabrics with gold thread and valuable woollen textiles, which were exported from the port of Famagusta. Cyprus was famous for the manufacture of gold thread, known as 'or de Chypre', which was used in making the fabric 'drap d'or de Chypre' as well as in embroidery. The production of expensive cloths, which continued to develop during the period of Venetian rule (1489-1570), with Nicosia as the main centre, was connected with another important craft, the dyeing of textiles. The royal dye-works at Nicosia were a very profitable business and a guarantee for the debts of the Frankish kings, who used to pay their tribute to the Egyptian Sultan with costly fabrics. Silk textiles mixed with gold thread, as well as camlets in various indelible colours, which were produced in the local textile factories, were also sent as gifts to the monarchies of the West. Both vegetal and mineral dyes were exploited on the island. The most renowned from Medieval times to the mid-19th century was the rizarin

or “robia di Cipri”, which was extracted from the roots of *Rubia tinctorum* (madder) and was used for dyeing cotton threads and fabrics in dark red colour.

Tanning and leather-working were also flourishing crafts during the Medieval and later periods. Weaving, dyeing and embroidery were essential for the manufacture and decoration of dress. The products of specialized craftsmen not only served the everyday needs of the wider strata of the population, but first of all satisfied the high demands of a ruling class of noblemen, being at the same time articles of profitable trade. Undoubtedly they reflect the high standard of manufactures and the long tradition of important crafts which flourished before the Ottoman Turks conquered the island.

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