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Alatzas: Handwoven Fabrics During the Early Industrial Period in Greece (1880–1920)

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The women of the village of Gymno used to say “Sweet the sleep in the morning, naked the butt at Easter.”¹ This was an injunction to young women who slept late to get up, go to the loom, and weave the fabrics so necessary to clothe a family in the Greek village.

In the provinces of Argolida and Corinthia in the Peloponnesian peninsula of Greece, women wove striped, checked, or monochrome cotton fabrics called *alatzas* (ah-lat-zás) from machine-spun yarn. These durable fabrics were also called *alatzathes* or *alatzenia* as were the clothes and household textiles made from them: women’s skirts and blouses, women’s underwear, men’s shirts, work scarves, and bed sheets. Every spring the women in poor villages donned a new set of clothes for Easter made from this handwoven fabric; the previous year’s “good” outfits became work clothes. Women in some of the better-off villages made silk dresses for weddings and festivals, but for workdays they wore durable *alatzas*.

Alatzas fabrics are not well understood in Greece, as they represent a relatively short transitional period from the older forms of dress based on Byzantine prototypes to modern Western ready-to-wear attire. In the Peloponnese, they appeared about 1890 and gradually faded away after the Second World War.

Angheliki Hatzimichali, the “mother” of Greek folk dress researchers, mentioned them once in her work on the costumes of Argolida and Corinthia.² Ioanna Papantoniou, who visited villages in these districts and collected local dress, included them in her description of the “new type” in her thorough article on the village dress of Argolida and Corinthia, stating only that the skirts and blouses were made of alatzas.³ Papantoniou, in a more recent publication, refers to the blue cotton checked fabrics as “Manchester gingham.”⁴ My own earlier articles on the dress of these two provinces of Greece also gave alatzas short shrift.⁵

Alatzas, and the functional clothes made from this durable fabric, remain understudied for several reasons. First, alatzas fabrics were used mainly for work clothes. Researchers of dress history routinely overlook everyday dress, as the authors of a recent Greek economic history have observed: “The corpus of data concerning regional costume codes is deficient in descriptions of everyday wear of the poorer levels of urban and rural inhabitants.”⁶ Second, the rich decorative elements of the older Argolidocorinthia outfits interested researchers more than the newer clothes adapted from Western fashion. Scholars tended to interpret the embroideries of the older garments as indigenous expressions of popular art.⁷ Lastly, the cut of the older chemises and overcoats preserved archaic forms of dress, reflecting the types of clothes most likely worn prior to the Turkish occupation (1453–1821). Conversely, women’s alatzas garments from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not evoke such authenticity; they were the poor “country cousins” of the Victorian and Edwardian styles worn in urban Europe. Additionally, they incorporated industrial products, e.g. machine-spun yarns.

These fabrics do bear merit, however, for what we can learn about the role textiles played during the early industrial period (1880–1920) in a poor, agricultural country. Further, the garments made from alatzas provide a case study of the introduction of a more global fashion system to previously self-sufficient communities.

This research asks the following questions. What exactly is alatzas and where did it come from? How was this fabric made and used? When and how did the factory goods used in the production of alatzas arrive in the villages? What happened to dress practices as relatively self-sufficient populations in geographically isolated areas gained access to these manufactured goods? How did villagers use alatzas to make the transition to the fashion system firmly in place in urban Europe?

Although this fabric has been mentioned in reference to local dress in Drymos, Pogoni, and Cyprus,⁸ I focus here on alatzas as produced and consumed in the Argolidocorinthia provinces. The study is based on varied sources of information. Evidence is drawn from interviews I conducted with elderly villagers, mostly women but also a few men, who remembered the making and wearing of local dress.⁹ If the informants still had extant examples in their dowries or old photographs of people wearing costumes, I photographed them. I also studied examples in museums in Greece.¹⁰ I read traveler's accounts and reviewed economic and demographic data. This approach can be labeled ethnohistorical in that it blends documentary research with fieldwork.¹¹

I present the evidence by first explaining briefly the geography and history of the two provinces of Argolida and Corinthia, followed by a description of Greece's industrialization, then describing the older and newer forms of dress using the words of the informants when possible. Finally, I offer my interpretation of this transitional form of dress as a material representation of the first stage of industrial development in Greece. This study also provides an "insider" perspective on the introduction of the concept of fashion to isolated villages, thus informing our understanding of the fashion process itself.

Argolida and Corinthia

Argolida and Corinthia are located in the northeastern part of the Peloponnesian peninsula. The ancient cities of Argos and Corinth gave their names to these provinces. Corinthia is bounded on the north by the Geranian mountains and the Gulf of Corinth, and to the west by the mountains of Killini. The Arahneo mountains separate Corinthia from Argolida in the southeastern region. Argolida's shores face the Saronic Gulf and the Argolic Gulf. To the west lie the mountains of Lyrkeia and Artemisio (Figure 1).

In the pre-historic era, the Mycenaean dwelled in the southern Argolid. Later, in ancient times, the towns of Corinth, Argos, and Nemea gained fame. After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Slavic tribes overran Argolida and Corinthia. In the medieval period, the Franks, the Byzantines, the Venetians, and finally the Turks ruled the Peloponnese, then known as the Moréa. The town of

Nafplion played an important part in the 1821 Greek uprising against the Ottoman Empire, and it became the country's first capital in 1828.

During the Turkish occupation, the Moréa was the pashalik of Tripolitza. Nafplion was heavily damaged during the uprising, and a traveler's guide published in 1826 described it as being in a "sorry state."¹² Turkish fashions, prohibited to Greeks under the occupation, enjoyed popularity. A Bey (e.g., Turkish chieftain) governed some forty villages on the plains of Argos, mostly settled by peasants of Albanian heritage who had migrated to the area during the Middle Ages. Koutsopodi was described as a "straggling village" and Nemea as a "gloomy place."¹³ Corinth itself was thinly populated and governed by a Bey who oversaw 163 villages.

By 1836, Nafplion had recovered and Europeanized with many French, Italian and German tailors, dressmakers, and boot makers as well as fashionable cafés and restaurants. After the arrival in 1837 of the newly appointed Greek monarchs, King Otto and Queen Amalia, town women adopted the fez, fitted velvet jacket, and silk skirt promoted by the new queen. The road to Argos had recently been completed.¹⁴ Travelers could now journey from Corinth through Nemea to Argos and Nafplion. Mid-century travelers who ventured off the beaten track, however, braced themselves for attacks by brigands, endured uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, and observed extreme poverty in villages.

Even by the end of the century, those travelers who headed to the mountains or away from the main roads found few amenities for foreign tourists. Rufus B. Richardson toured mountainous Corinthia and Arcadia, where there were no carriage roads or hotels; he slept on rugs on the floors of simple houses. In the

southern Argolid, he commented on the isolation of the people. About the village of Old Epidauros, he said “there is hardly a more neglected corner in Greece.”¹⁵ Such travelers’ accounts help us to understand the limited resources available in these villages.

No wonder so many villagers emigrated to the United States and Australia in search of a better life. Richard Clogg estimated that a quarter of all Greek males aged 15 to 40 left Greece for the United States between 1900 and 1915.¹⁶

Despite the region’s poverty, travelers found the women’s local dress to be very pretty. They also observed the constant spinning of yarn. In Eleusis, just northeast of the Perachora district in Corinthia, visitors might see “dark-haired handsome women, dressed in a becoming costume of white and red, spinning in front of their cottage doors”¹⁷ On the road to Epidauros, the site of the ancient theatre, villagers were “all picturesque in their country dress, but more especially the women, who spin flax as they walk....”¹⁸ (Figure 2).

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Greece’s economy started to industrialize. With the first wave of modernization, the old ways of making clothes in Argolida and Corinthia began to change.

Industrialization

Greece was one of the last countries in Europe to industrialize. In the late 1860s the Greek government began to assess ways to modernize its economy, which was decades behind its European neighbors. Prime Minister Alexandros Koumoundouros, contemplating ways to link Western European markets and Greek

raw materials, negotiated contracts for railroads to improve overland transportation. The first train in Greece linked Athens with the port of Piraeus in 1869. The Athens-Corinth line was completed in 1884. Branch lines connected Corinth with Argos, Mili, and Nafplion in the province of Argolida. The railways of the Peloponnese eventually extended to Tripoli, in the central region, and Kalamata, on the southwestern coast. The network was completed by 1902.¹⁹ Greece's railroads did not extend beyond the country's borders because of its mountainous interior; thus any foreign imports arrived by ship, most often at the port of Piraeus.

Another development in the industrialization of Greece was the cotton mill. The first cotton factory was established in Piraeus in 1870. Other cotton mills were erected in Patras, Syra, Livadia, Chalkis and Volo.²⁰ Most of these mills were spinning mills; later a few branched out to the weaving of coarse cloths. Argos was reported to have had cotton spinning and weaving mills in 1919.²¹ Generally, these mills began as spinning mills that distributed cotton yarn to women who wove staple cotton fabrics on wooden looms at home.²²

Greek-grown cotton supplied only half of the domestic mills' needs; the other half was imported. According to various reports, Greece also imported cotton yarn and cotton cloth.²³ England began exporting cotton yarn to Greece as early as the 1820s, and thereafter dominated the cotton trade. Greece also imported velvets, ribbons, braids, and trims from England, Italy, France, Germany and Austria. Very little ready-to-wear clothing made its way to Greece, even as late as 1908 when a U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor Report listed the only clothing imports as socks and underwear.²⁴

Foreign manufacturers of sewing machines sought entry into the Greek market as well. Elias Howe patented his lockstitch sewing machine in 1846, and soon manufacturing of sewing machines began in earnest.²⁵ By the 1860s evidence of their successful use in American homes can be found in the seams of clothing and quilts. The American company I. M. Singer was successful in marketing sewing machines internationally through its direct selling techniques and introduction of payment by installment. The company built factories in Scotland and Russia. One of the target markets for the European-made machines was the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire, where salesmen would head out daily in horse-drawn Singer wagons carrying genuine Singer sewing machines. By 1895 Singer had five branch offices in Bulgaria, the Balkans and Greece including Athens. As sales in Bulgaria and Greece rose from 7,696 in 1901 to 20,263 in 1914, the number of branch offices did too.²⁶ Argos was one of those branch offices, according to the informants.

I now turn to the manner in which villagers produced their clothing before and after the first wave of industrialization.

Dress Production in Self-Sufficient Communities

The villages of Argolida and Corinthia were relatively sparsely populated at the end of the nineteenth century. Most of the villages in this study were recorded as having fewer than a thousand people living in them during the census years of 1879, 1896, and 1907. Even the bigger towns were small by contemporary standards. In 1907, a year when the grandmothers and mothers of my informants were alive, Argos was by far the largest town in both provinces with a population of just 8,828. Kranidi, a

coastal town in the region of Ermionida, was the second most populous at 6,033. Nafplion (5,404) and Corinth (5,340) were the third and fourth most populous towns.²⁷

Most of the villagers survived on a subsistence economy. Those situated on the fertile plains of Argolida and Corinthia farmed cereals, tended vines, and collected olives. Near Nafplion tomatoes were grown. Raisins were a specialty of the Voha region. The pine forests of the Perachora district allowed the collecting of resin (for *retsina*, a type of wine), and timber. Stock raising was common in the highland villages supplemented by farming. A few highland villages in Argolida also grew tobacco. Those villages in Ermionida on the coast fared better than inland villages because agricultural work could be supplemented with fishing and sponge diving. Both Loutraki and Methana enjoyed some income from tourism by visitors to their therapeutic springs.²⁸ The transhumant shepherds known as Sarakatsani summered in the highlands with their flocks and wintered on the plains.

Observations made in 1892 by Rennell Rodd, an English diplomat stationed in Greece, verifies that villagers relied on limited resources. He estimated that:

The amount that will suffice to support a peasant family is extraordinarily small. Their wants are nearly all supplied by what they can grow; a few sheep furnish the wool which the women spin and weave, or if they have none themselves they can procure it from the shepherds in return for the breadstuffs which they grow; bread and olives furnish the staple of their food, and many of them hardly see money at all.²⁹

Rodd spoke to enough peasants to determine that most needed just a few drachmas a month to buy cotton, sugar, coffee, and tobacco. Some kept silkworms to be used for embroidery thread or fine fabric for veils or festival dresses.

The informants confirm this picture of self-reliance in the villages, particularly in regard to clothing production. The mothers of the informants over ninety years of age and the grandmothers of younger informants would have been born in the second half of the nineteenth century, and they would have been adults during the period 1875–1925. They wore the old style clothes, which they made with their own hands, from the spinning of the yarn to the sewing of the finished garments. With variations depending on locality, the components for women's clothing at that time consisted of a cotton chemise, an over-garment to support the breasts (either a short sleeved bodice or a jumper-like garment with a tight-fitting bodice), a woolen vest or coat, a cotton headscarf, and a woolen belt (Figure 2). They did not wear underpants. Aprons were part of the bridal ensemble in some locales. For men, the garments included shirts, *foustanella* skirts, knitted socks, and various jackets and coats.

Cotton was grown in the Peloponnese, but Greece's main cotton fields were across the Gulf of Corinth in Boeotia. The villagers in coastal Corinthia sometimes crossed over to Boeotia to work in the cotton fields around Livadia, bringing back enough fiber for their own use. However cotton was obtained, they separated the seeds from the fiber with a small hand-operated gin, then opened the fibers with a bow. Spinning cotton, which has short fibers, required skill. The warps had to be strong enough to withstand the action of weaving, so they were spun tighter than

the wefts and sized (e.g., coated with a starchy substance). Cotton was almost always woven in plain weave. Cotton fabrics fresh from the loom required not only washing to remove the sizing, but bleaching. Bleaching was accomplished by steeping fabrics in manure and potash for two or three days. One informant told us that this work was done in the spring around Easter. She explained how the women finished the cotton fabrics:

We were taking them to the river and shaking them to remove the manure ... we were taking it as it was and folding it. We had a mallet and we were beating it, folded, then we unfolded it and spread it down.... We spread them out on the stones near the river. We had many pieces of cotton ... we were taking them to the river for two or three days and they were becoming very white.³⁰

Then the women cut the fabrics and sewed them into clothes. Embroidery was added if the garment was designated for women's festive dress. The yarns for embroidery—wool, silk, or more rarely cotton—were plied, whereas the yarns for weaving were singles. The embroidery yarns were dyed in a range of colors, often red.

For wool fiber, they sheared their own sheep. They spun the yarn with distaffs and drop spindles, then wove the fabric in twill weave. Upon removal from the loom, the fabric was taken to a water mill for fulling. The fabrics were left in the swirling water for days, resulting in a dense, felt-like cloth. Because the garments into which they were made fitted closely to the body, itinerant tailors often cut the

cloth. These garments included men's hooded cloaks as well as women's coats and vests. The women themselves sewed the garments, then dyed them black with *melegos* (flowering ash) mordanted with alum or *stipsi*. An exception was the white (undyed) sleeveless vest worn on the plains. They embellished the edges of the garments for "best" dress with wool embroideries. In the colder mountainous districts, the weavers sometimes inserted pile yarns to provide extra warmth during the winter. The belts in some locales were made in a sprang technique, then dyed red. Both the sprang technique and the tie-dyed tassels were believed to have talismanic properties. Other dyestuffs for wool included pomegranate leaves, oak, and walnuts. Purchased dyes were not yet available; to wit, one of our interviewees stated: "Those years, people did not have [commercial] dyes."³¹ Decorative aprons were made from wool twill, sometimes dyed red, other times left white.

When a woman married, she assembled enough clothes to last a lifetime. The average family sent the bride to her new home with twenty outfits. For the poorest families, only two or three outfits sufficed. One of the ensembles was a "good" one to be worn on Sundays and festival days. That same outfit often served as a woman's burial clothes.

Making all the clothes and household linens for a family was a time-consuming task considering that a woman also had to take care of children and, in multi-generational households, elderly parents-in-law. She helped out in the fields and olive groves, and she tended to animals. Spindles were portable, which accounts for the many observations and pictorial depictions of women spinning while walking or standing in doorways. Spinning was a constant task to amass enough

yarn to weave fabrics. One informant said that it took a whole year to spin enough yarn for a chemise.³² Looms were bulky and took up space in small houses. Some women set up their looms outside during the dry summer months. One informant reported that women wove only after working in the fields, sometimes staying up most of the night, weaving by oil lamp, to complete a length of fabric.³³

Footwear posed another challenge. Rudimentary shoes made from pigskin were tied on at the ankles. These went by the name *tsarouchia*. They were slippery in the rain, and consequently many preferred to go without shoes. Some wore socks they knitted themselves and attached to leather soles, but others did not wear anything on their legs even in inclement weather. One group of young women who walked barefoot in the winter months to a distant village caused an uproar when they arrived with legs bloodied and sore. “Why don’t you wear socks?” they were asked. The reply: “we don’t wear them in our village.”³⁴

Even if they had the resources, the absence of roads in remote areas prevented villagers from traveling on horse-drawn carts and wagons to larger towns to buy yarns or fabrics. Further, peddlers found it difficult and not worth their while to travel with pack animals over rough terrain to poor, sparsely populated mountain villages. As a consequence, village women in mountainous areas held on to the old style clothes for a long time. Our oldest informants described their grandmothers as “poor ones” who didn’t know any better than to dress in such elementary clothing. One woman told us: “Everyone was wearing what they had at home. They didn’t buy—to pay for dresses—the way they pay now.”³⁵

With the arrival of the railroad, the stage was set for the modernization of Argolida and Corinthia.

Dress Production in the Early Industrial Period

After the railroad began operating in Argolida and Corinthia, new consumer products that affected local fabric and dress production appeared. These included machine-spun yarns, machine-made fabric, chemical dyes, sewing machines, and dress patterns. The adaptation of these new products to village dress did not occur simultaneously across the two provinces. Villages with proximity to urban centers adopted Western fashions earlier than those in the less accessible mountainous areas.

First came the machine-spun yarns. As already noted, spinning was the most time-consuming step of the clothes-making process. It is no wonder, then, that yarns spun in factories found a ready market as soon as they became available. These yarns could have been manufactured abroad in England, or in the Greek cotton factories established after 1870. The shift to machine-spun yarns replicates what had occurred decades earlier in New England when women abandoned hand spinning for factory-produced yarns during America's early industrialization period (1790–1830).

The informants from villages throughout Argolida and Corinthia remembered making and wearing *alatzas* fabrics from machine-spun yarns. Only people who lived in the larger towns did not wear *alatzas*, namely Nemea, Argos, Nafplion, Old Corinth, Kranidi and Fourni. The areas where *alatzas* weaving thrived

were mountainous Corinthia, mountainous Argolida, villages in the southern Argolid, and the inland villages of Ermionida and Methana. The Perachora villages were atypical in that women wore the old-style chemises longer than elsewhere, probably as a result of ethnic homogeneity. These villages are home to *Arvanites*, descendants of Albanian immigrants who first appeared at the Isthmus of Corinth in the fourteenth century. They spoke their own language, *Arvanitika*. Like the Arvanites in the Messoghia district of Attica, they held on to the embroidered chemises and woolen vests until after World War I.

Many informants talked of going to Argos to buy yarns. They even called the yarn “argitika.” (“Argitika” is a diminutive of “Argos,” meaning “yarn from Argos”). They asked each other: “Did you go to Argos to get alatza argitika?”³⁶ Others who lived further west went to Nemea for yarn. Some bought their yarns in Nafplion, where, I have already noted, many shops had been established after the War of Independence. (Nafplion is a port town with a good harbor.) No one mentioned shopping for yarn in Corinth. Peddlers from Argos and the Voaha area (e.g., seaside towns abutting the Corinthian Gulf) traveled to villages in the nearby foothills to sell yarns. At some point shops in Argos began selling factory-made alatzas fabric. Again, this could have been foreign-made or domestic cloth.

For inhabitants of the most remote villages, obtaining ready-made yarns and fabrics meant a long trip to Argos. The women of one village in the Arachneo mountains said: “We went to Argos to buy [yarns and] fabrics for our clothes. In years past nothing came here—not wagons, not carts, not cars. ... We didn’t buy the

clothes; they were made from handwoven fabrics. ... The entire village had looms."³⁷
(See Figure 3.)

The yarn for *alatzas* was purchased in packets, already bleached (if white) or dyed (if colored). The colors mentioned by the informants were red, blue, yellow, gray, and black. The colors *tou ladiou* ("of the oil") were preferred because they were colorfast. The informants may have been referring to Turkey red dyeing, which used oil as part of the mordanting process with madder or alizarin dyes.³⁸ Indigo, which was first synthesized in 1877, began to be produced on an industrial scale in Germany in 1897; by the second decade of the twentieth century it had all but replaced natural indigo.³⁹ Like Turkey red, indigo provided excellent colorfastness. Many of the surviving clothes of *alatzas* feature combinations of blue and/or red with white yarns.

Informants said that the warps were smaller in diameter than the wefts, which is verified by the artifacts made of *alatzas* in the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation collection. Thread counts show more warps than wefts. Informants mentioned yarn sizes 8, 10, 12 and 14, with 14s used for warps.⁴⁰ (In the cotton system, the higher the number, the finer the yarn.)

The weavers sized the warps first in flour water so they would not fray and break on the loom. If the fabric was made only from white yarns it was called "pani," a word meaning a white canvas-like cloth regardless of whether the yarn was hand- or machine-spun. If the white was mixed with colored yarns, it was called *alatzas*. The popular colors and patterns varied from region to region, but no hard and fast rules existed about color combinations or weaving patterns (Figure 4). The fabrics

could be striped, checked, or be woven with white warps and colored wefts, typically gray or blue, to produce an all over plain or solid color effect. Stripes were more common than checks, possibly because they required fewer yarn colors. Float weaves decorated hems of skirts or dresses intended for occasions that required “good” clothes. Sometimes homespun wool yarn was alternated with cotton in the weft (two wool, two cotton), creating a fabric that was warmer in the winter than an all-cotton fabric. They dyed the homespun wool with purchased dyes, often red. These dyes were available from peddlers or shops. A few of the informants distinguished the fabrics with wool, which they called *boudouri*, from the all-cotton fabrics (*alatzas*).

Repeatedly the informants told us that they wove whatever colors and patterns they wanted. Often, they copied an especially nice pattern: “Whoever was clever was making them better. One was looking at the other and stealing designs.”⁴¹ Village women assigned names to the more common patterns. Usually these names were descriptive. One was *pironoto* because it looked like a fork. (*Pirouni* means “fork” in Greek.) Another was *monostilos*, meaning “one column”. A third was *kritiko*, a diminutive of the island Crete, implying that this over four/under four pattern originated in Crete.⁴² Extant examples of *alatzas* show almost infinite variety. Like snowflakes, no two are the same.

After the women wove a length of *alatzas*, usually the fabric was folded or rolled and stored in trunks until needed. Dowries contained both fabrics and sets of sewn clothes. Some villagers who lacked adequate storage folded and layered cloth, blankets, rugs, and unused clothes one on top of the other to form an impressive

ceiling-high stack called a *baoulo*. Villagers made enough *alatzas* to cover all their clothing and household needs including sheets and tablecloths. One informant said: “We were weaving bolts of fabric and they were lasting for years.” She continued: “We had a ‘deposit’ of materials. Enough for all our lives.”⁴³ In fact, some informants still had rolls of unused *alatzas*.

The women sewed blouses, skirts, and dresses for their clothing. They had several names for these garments, as listed in the glossary below:

Bolka or *polka*: a blouse that buttoned in the front (Figure 5). It could be made of other fabrics in addition to *alatzas*. Some informants said that “polka” was an Arvanitika word. Others called it a diminutive of the generic word for shirt in Greek, *poukamisaki*.

Matine: a blouse that buttoned in the front; synonymous with *bolka*. The term probably derived from the French word for informal morning dress.

Fousta: a skirt gathered to a waistband (Figure 5).

Misofori: a skirt gathered to a waistband. Some informants distinguished the *misofori* from the *fousta* and *foustani* by saying it did not have ruffles. Others said they made *misofori* with *kormi* (skirt with sleeveless bodice, which was the same as a *foustani*).

Foustani: a dress, either with or without sleeves; a *bolka* was worn over a sleeveless *foustani* (Figure 6).

Kondo: In Methana and Ermionida, the Arvanites used this term to describe the *fousta*, a skirt which may or may not be attached to a sleeveless bodice.

The fabric was also used for men's shirts, women's drawers or underpants called *kilotes*, work scarves, and children's one-piece garments. The men's shirts were not like western shirts, but rather like shirts with a little skirt. Originally they were worn over stockings, like a foustanella (Figure 7). Later, villagers wore them over western-style trousers. The large scarves were intended for working in the fields. The women wore them in a way that provided protection from the sun (Figure 8).

The *kilotes* underpants resembled Victorian drawers; they were cut with a gusset and had cords that tied around the waist (Figure 9). Many of our interviewees talked about them and how they tried to make them nice with trimmings. At first *kilotes* were considered a step towards modernity. Our informants expressed shock at the fact that the women of their grandmothers' generation did not wear underwear. They considered their grandmothers "backward." But to their grandmothers, wearing drawers was not something with which they were accustomed. Old women resisted attempts by their daughters to get them to wear drawers. But as time went on, the wearing of these rough underpants also became a mark of backwardness. As was so often the way when Greek villagers signaled social disapproval, they made jokes about women who wore handwoven drawers. One town dweller told the story of a bride from a mountainous village whose *kilotes* ripped loudly as she descended from her mule, broadcasting her social standing as a country bumpkin.⁴⁴

The women's clothes made from *alatzas* are reminiscent of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century western fashion: long skirts with bias-cut ruffles and front-buttoning bodices (Figure 10). "We used to put ruffles, like the gypsies," one

woman said.⁴⁵ The ruffles were called *harbalathes* or *frabalathes*. These garments probably developed from commercial patterns called *figurines* for skirts and bodices in the 1890s and early 1900s (Figure 11). Several informants described skirts with “tails.” One woman said: “The skirts were filled out in back, like a tail.”⁴⁶ They resembled skirts popular in fashion at the time: skirts with a flat front and gathers in the back, often flounced or ruffled. The skirts with “tails” were worn by women who could afford to pay a seamstress to make the new style. Those at the bottom of the social ladder were, apparently, jealous, which resulted in catty remarks. One woman told us that: “The ‘aristocracy’ were wearing skirts with big ruffles, tails behind which dragged on the ground.... Katerina’s mother-in-law had one. Someone told her to cut her tail!”⁴⁷ As time went on, the skirts became shorter and less full just as they did in Western fashion.

The blouses varied somewhat, reflecting changes in Western fashion. Most of the blouses buttoned up the front and had small collars, like loose versions of late Victorian or Edwardian blouses (Figures 12 & 13). Some had yokes. Others had pleats, like a shirtwaist blouse. One had a side front opening like blouses of the WWI era (Figure 14). Village women did not wear corsets, so their dressed bodies do not resemble the silhouettes familiar to fashion historians.

The women often trimmed edges of skirts and bodices. They cut scallop-like edges in the skirts that they called “tongues” and decorated them (Figure 15). Sometimes they used manufactured trims like ribbon, braid, bias tape, and rickrack, which they bought from the peddlers or the shops. Other times they bound the edge of the hem with bias strips of *alatzas*, usually in a contrasting pattern.

The profession of seamstress arose when sewing machines and paper patterns arrived in the villages. Several of our informants worked as seamstresses (*modistra* sing., *modistres* pl.) making clothing for other women in their villages on their sewing machines. Almost all the villages had at least one *modistra*. Two levels of seamstresses existed, depending on skill. One worked with paper patterns and finer fabrics like silk crepe de chine; the other sewed only *alatzas* clothes and took patterns from existing clothes. One of our interviewees, who was a seamstress, explained:

I didn't have patterns like the big *modistres*. I just cut and made them. ... The paper patterns were used by the *modistres* who were bigger than me. There were two good *modistres* here. My cousin was one. I made the *matinethes*, *alatzenia*, the names I knew.⁴⁸

For a few villages, there were no seamstresses. The women sewed all their clothes themselves. As a result, the clothes were simple. One woman explained: "We didn't need a seamstress; all we did was put some gathers."⁴⁹

Salesmen came to the villages to sell sewing machines. All the sewing machines were Singers. One seamstress, who still had her sewing machine, explained:

I bought my sewing machine (Figure 16) from Argos. It was a Singer. It cost 112 drachmaes. I paid for it myself with installments. There was no foot pedal at first. I operated it by hand. Later I asked for a mechanic to come and

add the foot pedal. There was a factory in Argos. The representative came every month to collect the installments.⁵⁰

Another interviewee's mother-in-law was a seamstress in the small village of Pisia, which had only 387 people in 1907. To maximize her investment, she periodically asked her husband to carry her machine to the larger village of Perachora where she sewed foustanella and sleeveless jackets.⁵¹

Many women did not buy machines, despite the possibility of paying by installment: "Someone came and tried to sell a Singer sewing machine to my mother for 100 drachmae, but she said 'no, I have my hands.'"⁵² Women often borrowed a machine from a neighbor. Electrification of the Greek villages was not completed until the 1950s, so the sewing machines were operated by hand crank or foot treadle. One woman affectionately called her machine "the turtle."⁵³

Surviving garments of *alatzas* provide evidence that most women used sewing machines while a few stitched by hand. This material evidence corroborates the information provided by the informants. In Schinohori, Argolida we encountered a dowry of *alatzas* garments dated approximately 1900 to 1920. Every piece of clothing—blouses, skirts, and a dress—exhibited machine-sewn seams.⁵⁴ Nearly all the garments made from *alatzas* in the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation have some machine stitching. They reveal that some women had problems handling a sewing machine (e.g., erratic stitching). They also show unusual interpretations of how to assemble pattern pieces. (See figures 17 & 18.) Most of the patterns sold in

Greece were Italian, and Greek village women could not read foreign languages. Further, some women were illiterate.

The clothes needed were not many; a modest dowry required ten to twelve outfits. The outfits were intended to vary enough to distinguish between workdays and festival days. Clothes helped mark a passage into a new stage of life, such as a wedding or engagement. In many of the more prosperous villages, the “good” clothes were made from purchased silk or wool fabric. In the poorer villages, a new set of *alatzas* clothes sufficed for “good.” When the *alatzas* became worn-looking, they were relegated to everyday wear. A death in a family demanded some sort of outward show of mourning. Women in the poor villages could not afford to get a whole new outfit, so they changed only the scarf and the apron to black. Others dyed their *alatzas* wardrobe black.

The poverty so present in the mountainous areas sometimes prevented women from having more than one or two sets of clothes. Distinctions in social status through clothing simply were not possible. One woman said:

The engaged, the newly married, they wore the same. Only for the [wedding] ceremony did they have different clothes. The old, the little children – all wore the same – *alatzas* that we wove.⁵⁵

Another commented that: “They did not wear as now different clothes for summer, winter, and spring. At that time we had one outfit. ... we washed clothes every fifteen days. We didn’t know anything about changing clothes.”⁵⁶

After 1940 life changed in Greek villages. During the Second World War, Greeks suffered during the German occupation of their country. The German exodus

was followed by years of civil war. Finally, towards the end of the decade, life began to normalize. Interviewees told us that during the war, they used up their “deposits” of alatzathes. Many factories were damaged during the German occupation, especially in Pireaus. The Marshall Plan provided funds from the Allies to help Greece get back on its feet. Women stopped weaving alatzas and started buying finished fabric.

What replaced the alatzas? Brides in the coastal villages were already getting married in silk dresses during the 1920s and 1930s and buying ready-made fabric for everyday clothes. This spread to the inland villages, where no one married in alatzas after the Second World War. A bride might still get alatzas in a dowry, especially if that dowry included items passed down from her mother. But she could choose not to wear the alatzas. One woman confided: “I had alatzas kilotes in my dowry but I didn’t wear them.”⁵⁷ A few thrifty women we interviewed, who had married in the 1930s, continued to wear alatzas as work clothes even as late as the 1980s. The old clothes that survived in the trunks and baoulos were used as rags, passed down to children, or sold to peddlers who bought them for their value as antiques. The women could not understand why the peddlers wanted them: “We were wondering why they needed them.”⁵⁸ Others were sorry that these mementoes of bygone days were gone forever: “Why didn’t we keep them?”⁵⁹

Many younger women didn’t like the alatzas clothes. They described them as “stiff” and “thick.” They regarded them as “backward.” One woman commented: “They didn’t have good fabrics for years.”⁶⁰ Another exclaimed: “Our mothers wore these [alatzathes]. *We* began to be in civilization!”⁶¹ One woman recalled that she

had to wear alatzas despite the fact that other girls wore good dresses. Like a Greek Cinderella, she explained: “I had a stepmother and whatever she gave me I had to wear.”⁶² This same woman said that after she married, she started wearing dresses and high-heeled shoes, both of which she equated with being “modern.”

Alatzas: Material Evidence of Industrialization

I interpret alatzas as a representation of the first stage of economic development in Greece. Kitty Dickerson identified this as the *embryonic stage* in her six-stage model of the development of a country’s textile and apparel industry.⁶³ Dickerson’s six stages are: 1) the embryonic stage, 2) early export of apparel, 3) more advanced production of fabric and apparel, 4), the “golden age,” 5) full maturity, and 6) significant decline. The embryonic stage is found in the least-developed countries, and consists mostly of cottage industries that produce goods for domestic consumption. Simple hand-produced fabrics from natural fibers are typical. Sometimes natural fibers, often cotton, are exported. Dickerson adapted this model from Brian Toyne et al. who further characterized countries in this first stage as “an amalgamation of cottage industries” who are “net importers.”⁶⁴ Countries in the embryonic stage are oriented toward producing simple fabrics and garments from indigenous fibers for domestic consumption.

This description fits the example of alatzas just explained. Greece’s fledgling cotton mills consisted of just seventeen spinning mills and six weaving mills in 1908 according to an estimate by the United States Department of Commerce.⁶⁵ These mills used lower grade cotton to spin yarns intended for the “peasant classes.”

Weaving mills specialized in “sheetings, coarse cottonades, plaids, gingham, cotton trouserings, and checks and stripes.” The cottonades, plaids, and gingham were the *alatzas* fabrics sold in Argos and elsewhere in Greece. Tariffs on imported goods made it more economical for the villagers to buy Greek-made yarns and fabrics than higher quality imported fabrics. Handlooms still played “a considerable part in the occupations of the ... women” who wove “brightly striped dress materials” in 1919, according to a British Naval Intelligence report.⁶⁶

The building of Greece’s railroad lines coincided with the emerging textile industry and the availability of consumer products for making apparel more efficiently than in the past. The line to the Peloponnese was one of the country’s earliest railroad lines. Trains bound for Greece’s provincial towns carried both imported and domestic goods. The range of goods transported to Argos must have included yarns and fabrics produced in Pireaus’s cotton mills, imported European cottons, velvets, laces, and trims; Singer sewing machines; packaged dyes; and paper patterns. The trains also transported the capital equipment to furnish Argos’ own cotton mills. Basil Gounaris, in his study of the introduction of the railways into the Balkans, claims that: “Railways and industrialization have traditionally been considered as developments closely related to each other.”⁶⁷ He adds that edible goods, household items, and cotton, woolen, and silk goods were the primary targets of consumption transported on the railroads.

As both Dickerson and Toyne et al explain, countries in the embryonic stage export small amounts of cotton as well as producing for the domestic market. By 1932, “*aladgas*” [*sic*] made up 35% of the total cotton goods produced in Greece. The

cotton industry was cited as “greatly improving”, with 2,240,000 packets of cotton yarn produced; in 1938, 1,049 tons of cotton yarn were exported.⁶⁸

Where did the word “alatzas” come from? Why did the villagers call the fabric “alatzas” and not “rigoto” (striped) or “karoto” (checked)? Alatzas is not a word used to describe the fabrics of the older clothes made before 1890 in Argolidocorinthia. According to a Modern Greek dictionary, alatzas is a “cotton fabric usually multicolored, thick, cheap; from the Turkish ‘alaca.’”⁶⁹ The material properties of the fabric “alatzas” and its variations changed over the years. Montgomery’s fabric glossary defines “alacha” (also allegae, allejae, alligeer, and elatch) as “a striped cloth of mixed cotton-and-silk, commonly red-and-white or blue-and-white” originally from India.⁷⁰ “Alachas” from India’s Coromandel coast were striped and entirely from cotton. They were available in Turkey in late medieval times as evidenced by the listing of women’s “alaca” garments in fifteenth-century estate inventories from Bursa.⁷¹

Greek economic histories provide further insight. In the eighteenth century, the towns of Trikala and Tyrnavos produced enough “alaca,” which were described as coarse cottons, for export to Adriatic ports according to Dupré, a French merchant of Arta.⁷² Leake visited Thessaly in 1806 and observed three dye-works as well as looms in houses that produced cotton alaca. The Tyrnavos industry declined in the late nineteenth century, no doubt as a result of imports from industrialized countries and the growing number of Greek cotton mills.⁷³ The dwindling amounts of Tyrnavos alaca cloth was absorbed into the local market instead.

If the villagers of Argolida and Corinthia perhaps knew of *alatzas*, they did not wear it until machine-spun yarns made it possible to produce fabrics more efficiently than spinning and dyeing the yarn themselves. The availability of yarn, and soon after woven fabric, paper patterns and sewing machines introduced village women to the notion of fashion. Fashion can be defined as changing styles of dress and appearance adopted by a group of people at any given time and place.⁷⁴ In the Greek village, change was often generational. During the Turkish occupation, change happened very slowly. In isolated areas, the old Byzantine style clothes persisted until industrialization brought new products and tools. Around 1890, along came the yarns, fabrics, trims, and European patterns that offered a cost advantage (e.g., time savings) for clothing production. Skirts and blouses based on late Victorian and Edwardian modes, “drawers,” and high heels signaled modernity. Sewing machines purchased in installments by a few women in a village allowed them to earn extra income sewing the new European styles.

Villagers in more remote areas, who in the nineteenth century rarely met anyone from outside their own geographical region, gradually became aware of the modern world, describing their own way of life as “backward.” One woman expressed it this way: “we didn’t know anything ... we didn’t have fashion then.”⁷⁵ Village women were drawn into the fashion system defined by changing forms of dress. They viewed the arrival of fashion as if they were passive observers of a sociological shift: they said simply “there was a change.”

This example from Argolidocorinthia provides a microscopic view of the first stages of industrialization and its effect on local clothing practices. After the

introduction of machine spun yarn and manufactured fabrics along with sewing machines and paper patterns, villagers abandoned the old types of dress that did not change significantly from one generation to the next for those that changed more rapidly.

Further work on alatzathes is needed to explain its distribution in other parts of Greece and the Balkans. They were woven in Arcadia in the Peloponnese, a province that borders Argolida. However, the women of Attica and Boeotia did not make striped and checked cotton fabrics, although they did weave cloth from machine spun yarns. Knowing where alatzas was woven would aid in interpreting the effect of industrialization on rural dress. Additional case studies on rural dress are also welcome.

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Figures

Figure 1. Map of Argolidocorinthia.

Figure 2. Carl Haag, *Greek Woman*, 1861. Oil on canvas. ©2013 by Benaki Museum – Photographic Archives, Athens.

Figure 3. Loom, Fourni, Argolida. Photograph by author. Photograph Archives, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion.

Figure 4. *Alatzas* fabric details: a. cotton stripe, b. cotton check, c. cotton and wool mixture (weft has two wool, two cotton, etc.), d. float weave. Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion, 4a is 1976.6.1850, 4b is 1976.6.1846, 4c is from a privately-owned dowry from Adami, Argolida dated c. 1910–20, 4d is 1977.06.33.

Figure 5. Blouse (*polka, bolka, matine*) and skirt (*fousta, misofori*), Argolida after 1920. Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion, 1977.06.101 and 1976.06.1846.

Figure 6. Dress (*foustani*), Mycenae, Argolida, before 1940. Handsewn. Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion, 1977.06.32.

Figure 7. Photograph of Nicholas Peppas in *foustanella* of *alatzas*. Didima, Argolida. Copied with permission. Photograph Archives, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion.

Figure 8. Headscarf (*kefalopothia*) worn when working in the fields. Adami, Argolida. Photograph by author. Photograph Archives, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion.

Figure 9. Women's drawers (*kilotes*). Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion, 1977.06.0192.

Figure 10. Greek woman modeling a skirt of *alatzas* from her dowry. Her blouse, also from her dowry, is made of machine-woven cotton calico. Adami, Argolida, 1986. Photograph by author. Photograph Archives, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion.

Figure 11. Pattern for ladies' shirtwaist outfit, *Butterick*, 1903. Betty Williams Collection, Commercial Pattern Archives, University of Rhode Island.

Figure 12. Shirtwaist of *alatzas*, Argolida. Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion, 1979.06.0091.

Figure 13. Pattern for ladies' shirtwaist, *Harper's Bazar*, 1891. Betty Williams Collection, Commercial Pattern Archives, University of Rhode Island.

Figure 14. Blouse (*bolka*), before 1940, Arachneo, Argolida. Photograph by author. Photograph Archives, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion.

Figure 15. Greek woman modeling a skirt with “tongues” at the hem. Solomos, Corinthia, 1986. Photograph by author. Photograph Archives, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion.

Figure 16. Singer sewing machine belonging to a seamstress from Kiveri, Argolida. The village of Kiveri received electricity in the summer of 1958. Photograph by author. Photograph Archives, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion.

Figure 17. Pattern for ladies’ shirt-blouse with Dutch collar, *Butterick*, 1908. Betty Williams Collection, Commercial Pattern Archives, University of Rhode Island.

Figure 18. Blouse (*bolka, matine*), Gymno, Argolida, early twentieth century. The facing was not folded at center front, so the collar does not meet as intended. (See pattern in figure 17 for similar blouse.) Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Nafplion, 1976.06.1390.

Notes

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4. Ioanna Papantoniou, *Greek Dress From Ancient Times to the Early Twentieth Century* (Athens: Commercial Bank of Greece, 2000), 280, 282. This name derived from the cotton plaids produced in Manchester, England.
5. Linda Welters, "Women's Traditional Dress in the Provinces of Argolida and Corinthia. Part I: Stability and Change," *Ethnografika* 7 (1989): 17–30; Linda Welters, "Women's Traditional Dress in Argolidocorinthia: Local Variations," *Ethnografika* 11 (1998): 133–76.
6. Spyros I. Asdrachas, N. E. Karapidakis, Olga Katsiardi-Hering, Eftychia D. Liata, Anna Matthaiou, Michel Sivignon, and Traian Stoianovich, *Greek Economic History, 15th–19th Centuries*, vol. 1. Trans. Doolie Sloman (Athens: Piraeus Group Bank Cultural Foundation, 2007), 505.
7. Popi Zora, *Embroideries and Jewellery of Greek National Costumes* (Athens: Museum of Greek Folk Art, 1981).
8. For details on the striped alatzas used for summer overdresses in Drymos, Macedonia, see Ioanna Papantoniou, "A First Attempt at an Introduction to Greek Traditional Costume (Women's)," *Ethnografika* (1978): 18; for everyday cotton jackets called alatzas in Pogoni, see Angheliki Hatzimichali, *The Greek Folk Costume: Costumes with the Sigouni*, Athens: Melissa (1979): 241; for outer garments of "alatzies" in Cyprus, see Angheliki Hatzimichali, *The Greek Folk Costume: Costumes with the Kavadi*, Athens: Melissa (1984): 390.
9. Together with translators I visited 58 villages in 1986. We conducted 109 interviews with a total of 146 informants.
10. The museums whose collections I studied included the Benaki Museum, the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Folk Art Museum, Greek Women's Club of Athens, and Greek Women's Club of Argos. In 2011, I further examined the alatzas garments in the collection of the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation.
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12. James Duncan, *The Modern Traveller: Greece Vol. II* (London: William Clowes, 1826), 93–4.
13. Ibid., 155.
14. Major Sir Grenville Temple, *Excursions in the Mediterranean* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1836), 40.
15. Rufus B. Anderson, *Vacation Days in Greece* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 145.
16. Richard Clogg, *A Concise History of Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 113.
17. T. Fitz-Patrick, *An Autumn Cruise in the Aegean* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1886): 250.
18. Philip Sanford Marden, *Greece and the Aegean Islands* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1907): 201.
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20. William Alexander Graham Clark, *Cotton Textile Trade in Turkish Empire, Greece, and Italy* (Washington D.C.: Department of Commerce and Labor, 1908): 56.
21. Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A Handbook of Greece: Volume I: The Mainland of Old Greece and Certain Neighboring Islands* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1919): 154, 403.
22. Odysseus Koumadorakis, *In the Footprints of Yesterday: Old Times and Traditional Occupations* (Argos, Argolida: Ek Prooimiou, 2010): 175–6, 183.
23. Clark, *Cotton Textile Trade*, 55, 59; A.N. Cumberbatch, *Economic Conditions in Greece (1932-33)* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1934): 35.
24. Ibid, 59.
25. Widespread use of sewing machines only became possible with the development of machine thread. The first successful sewing machine thread, on the market by 1852, was made of silk. It proved too expensive for most consumers. Coats and Clark is credited with the developing inexpensive cotton thread for sewing machines in the early 1860s. It was marketed as O.N.T. (Our New Thread). Jenny Yearous, "Stitches in Time: The Development of Sewing Thread in the Nineteenth Century and Beyond," Edited by Virginia Gunn. *Uncoverings* 19 (1998): 163, 177.

26. Andrew Godley, "Consumer Durables and Westernization in the Middle East: The Diffusion of Singer Sewing Machines in the Ottoman Empire, 1880-1920" (paper presented to the *Middle Eastern Path to Development: A Conversation with Business History and Regional Studies Conference*, University of Reading, June 10-11, 2005).
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30. Interview conducted at Kaparelli, Argolida, December 3, 1986.
31. Ibid.
32. Interview conducted at Kefalovrisso, Argolida, October 23, 1986.
33. Interview conducted at Assini, Argolida, October 30, 1986.
34. Interview conducted at Lyrkeia, Argolida, October 22, 1986.
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36. Interview conducted at Perachora, Corinthia, November 1, 1986.
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39. Ibid. 100-01.
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41. Interview conducted at Kefalovrisso, Argolida, October 23, 1986.
42. Interview conducted at Heli, Argolida, October 29, 1986.

43. Interview conducted at Dimena, Argolida, November 12, 1986.
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46. Interview conducted at Zeugolatio, Corinthia, December 8, 1986.
47. Interview conducted at Ligourio, Argolida, November 12, 1986.
48. Interview conducted at Kiveri, Argolida, October 15, 1986.
49. Interview conducted at Dimena, Argolida, November 12, 1986.
50. Interview conducted at Kiveri, Argolida, October 15, 1986.
51. Interview conducted at Pisia, Corinthia, December 4, 1986.
52. Interview conducted at Karia, Argolida, October 27, 1986.
53. Interview conducted at Agios Dimitrios, Argolida, October 28, 1986
54. The collection belonged to the mother of one of the informants from Schinohori, Argolida.
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