



One of the Guilds of Thrapsano

The Potters of Thrapsano – Maria Voyatzoglou

Large earthenware jars, pithoi, for storing oil, wine and cereals have been made in Crete for over 3,000 years and it is likely that the methods used by the potters of Thrapsano have changed little over the years. But what was once a thriving activity involving about half the adult male population has now almost disappeared.

Thrapsano is a village of about 1500 inhabitants in the province of Peliada 30 kilometres from Herakleion. It is known all over Crete as the village of the jar makers. Potting has always been a seasonal activity, usually combined with farming. The potters form themselves into guilds of six – Vendema – and set off for the summer months to make and sell their jars in different parts of Crete. Between 30-35 groups used to set out each year and about 15,000 jars would be made, all of which would be bought locally.

Since 1945 living and working conditions have gradually changed. The cultivation of vines has now almost replaced cereals and has meant that more time must be spent on the land, and consequently less time is available for making jars. At the same time plastic containers have arrived and have been found to be durable and inexpensive substitutes. By 1969 there were only two or three guilds, with less than the traditional six members, left and they worked only in the vicinity of Thrapsano. Of the ten master-craftsmen still living in the village only three were still making jars, and only one of these has considered adapting his production to cater for the present day needs of the inhabitants.

Maria Voyatzogiou considered it important that the skills and working methods of the Thrapsano potters should be accurately recorded before they disappeared completely and in 1970 she visited the village many times interviewing, sketching and taking photographs. In this article, which is taken from her paper 'The Jars at the Village of Thrapsano, Crete', Aristotle University of

Thessaloniki, she describes the organisation of the Vendema (groups of potters) and their methods of making and firing the jars.

The Vendema and the Organization of the Guild

Every year guilds of jar-makers used to set out from Thrapsano to settle in other parts of Crete, to make and sell jars during the three summer months. This system of work is called *Vendema* and those who take part in it are called the *Vendemaroi*.

The *Vendema* began on May 21st and lasted till September 14th and the departure of the potters from Thrapsano was a festive occasion. The guilds separated as soon as they came out of the village, each going in a different direction.

Traditionally the guild consists of six craftsmen, each with a clearly defined role:-

1. The Master-Potter, 2. The Second Potter, 3. The Wheeler
4. The Clay Man, 5. The Wood-Cutter and 6. The Carrier.

On reaching their destination the Master negotiates renting a field where the workshop can be set up. The most suitable field is one which offers the three essential materials: clay, water and wood for fuel. The guild either build a new kiln or repair an old one and they also make simple huts from whatever materials are available where they can eat and rest. Only clay preparation is done indoors. The turn-tables are set up in the open and men work out of doors in the sun so that the bands of the jars may dry quickly. During the first forty days the jars are made, usually between 400-500 pieces. After that the kiln is fired and the pots sold. At the end of the *vendema* the profits are shared.

Work for all the guild members usually begins at 4.30 in the morning. Dry clay brought in the day before is prepared i.e. pounded and sieved and then kneaded with water ready

