



New Europe College
Institute for Advanced Study



European
Research
Council

Anastasia Falierou

Urban Transformation of the Mytilinian Bourgeoisie

The Case of the Kourtzis Family

Working Paper

ERC-CoG-2014 grant no. 646489 *LuxFaSS*



URBAN TRANSFORMATION OF THE MYTILINIAN BOURGEOISIE: THE CASE OF THE KOURTZIS FAMILY

ANASTASIA FALIEROU

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Mytilene was moving rapidly towards urban transformation. The town followed the broader trajectory of the Eastern Mediterranean ports whose trade and industry flourished in this period¹; these cities, situated between East and West, had a mixed character, which accounted for an extremely fertile fusion and coexistence of foreign elements and the local Greek population. In the busy harbor of Mytilene, with a burgeoning local industry based mainly on the processing of olive oil, the Greek element of the Ottoman Lesbos played a key role in the economic development and managed to prevail economically.

This article aims to examine both the process of urban transformation and civilizing trend of the Greek bourgeoisie in Mytilene in the second half of the nineteenth century, focusing on the Kourtzis family. In the first part of the study, I tackle the reasons, which make the family a particularly useful case for studying consumer practices and bourgeois cultural influence, both in the late Ottoman Empire and the newly-founded Greek nation-state. Subsequently, I examine the world of the Mytilian bourgeoisie, presenting the political and socio-economic factors that contributed to the island's prosperity and the emergence of the upper middle class. Then, I analyze the way of life, the material, and spiritual pursuits, as well as the system of values that the Mytilian bourgeoisie embraced, as featured in the Kourtzis family papers.²

¹For the Ottoman port cities, see Keyder Çağlar, Y. Evtüp Özveren and Donald Quataert, "Port cities in the Ottoman Empire: Some Theoretical and Historical Perspectives," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 16, no. 4 (1993), 519-558; *The Ottoman City Between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir and Istanbul*, ed. Edhem Eldem, Daniel Goffman, and Bruce Masters (Cambridge, 1999); Malte Fuhrmann and Vangelis Kechriotis, "The Late Ottoman Port Cities and Their Inhabitants: Subjectivity, Urbanity and Conflicting Orders," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 24, no. 2 (2009), 71-78; *Cities of the Mediterranean: From the Ottomans to the Present Day*, ed. Biray Kolluoğlu and Meltem Toksöz (London and New York, 2010).

²The Kourtzis family papers are in the Public Library of Mytilene. I would like to express my gratitude to the Director of the Library, Mrs. Maria Grigora, for all her help during my research and to Mrs Helen Gardikas-

Covering the entrepreneurial, personal, and social life of four generations of the Lesbos businessmen, the papers of the Kourtzis family constitute one of the most important private collections of the island. The wealth of the material is even visible from the sizable corpus of the exhibits (photographs, postcards, wills, marriage contracts, Ottoman property titles and appointments, school notebooks, films from the period 1925-1927, newspapers, magazines, commercial correspondence, personal letters, handwritten notes and revenues-expenses notebooks, diaries, architectural designs of residences and industrial facilities) that the papers include and which cover the period from the early nineteenth century up to 1985.

My decision to focus on the Kourtzis family³ stems from its fascinating trajectory across time and space,⁴ and the involvement of its members in multifaceted business activities, which covered a wide spectrum of social, political, and economic developments of the late Ottoman Empire.

The main protagonist of the archive is Panos Kourtzis⁵ (1850-1931), a brilliant, insightful, and competent man who managed to exploit the political and economic conjuncture of the time and become one of the most important Greek businessmen. Panos was born in Mytilene and, at the age of twenty, moved to Constantinople, where he gradually developed a wide range of business activities, involving commerce, banking, industry, and tourism.

Some of Kourtzis' most important entrepreneurial activities were the olive press at the "Center" (*Kentron*), the Steamboat of the Aegean⁶, the Kozlu mines⁷ and the Bank of Mytilene. Undoubtedly, Panos' acquaintance and close cooperation with the banker

Katsiadakis for reading this text. Researchers are able access to most of the original archival material through the Historical Archive of the Aegean "Ergani" repository <http://www.ergani-repository.gr>

³ For the Kourtzis family, see *Archeio Kourtzi: istoriki tekmiriosi*, ed. Kristis Konnaris (Mytilene, 2007).

⁴ The story of the Kourtzis family in the Ottoman Empire started when, in the late eighteenth century, Anastasios Kourtzis, a refugee from Tiflis (Tbilisi) in Georgia settled with his son, Panagiotis, in Lesbos. Panagiotis married twice, and had one daughter, Amersouda (1815-1834), and three sons Konstantis (1792-1835), Mihail (1817-1905), and Dimitrios (1810-1835?). Mihail produced five children from his marriage with Irini Tzatzou. Their first-born son, Panos, married Myrsinio Vassileiou, with whom he had two children: Mihail/Mitsa (1884-1944), and Giorgio (1899-1952), Kristis Konnaris, "Archeio Kourtzi: istorika simeiomata epiheiriseon kai prosopon," in *Archeio Kourtzi: istoriki tekmiriosi*, ed. Kristis Konnaris (Mytilene, 2007), 26-27.

⁵ For an analysis of Panos Kourtzis' life and business activities, see Yannis Yannitsiotis, "Oi 'metamorfoseis' tou epiheirimatikou eautou: I synkrotisi tis andrikis hypokeimenikotitas stin autoviografia tou Panou Kourtzi," in *Archeio Kourtzi: istoriki tekmiriosi*, ed. Kristis Konnaris (Mytilene, 2007), 133-150.

⁶ Evrydiki Sifneos, "P.M. Courdgis and the Birth of a Greek-Ottoman Liner Company: The Aegean Steamship Company", in *Following the Nereids. Sea routes and maritime business, 16th-20th*, ed. Maria Chatziioannou and Gelina Harlaftis (Athens: Kerkyra, 2006), 121-135.

⁷ For the Kozlou mines see Evrydiki Sifneos, "Was the Extraction of Coal at Kozlu and Zonguldak Mines Profitable? An Attempt at an Answer from the Courdgi Papers", in *The Economic and Social Development of the Port Cities of the Southeastern Black Sea Coast and Hinterland, late 18th - Beginning of the 20th Century*, ed. Edhem Eldem, Sophia Laiou, and V. Kechriotis (Corfu, 2017), 109-122.

Georgios Zarifis must have played a decisive role in the development of his business. In 1896, Kourtzis was appointed Vice-Consul of Germany in Mytilene and remained in this position until 1928.⁸ Panos' firstborn son, Mitsas (1884-1944) also features prominently in the papers, as is the case for Mitsas' son and Panos Kourtzis' grandson, Nellos (1911-1998). On the women's side, Panos' wife Myrsinio née Vassileiou, played a similarly crucial role within the family network.⁹ The daughter of a wealthy merchant and landholder Panagiotis Vassileiou and Efthimia née M. Simandiri, she also hailed from the island's elite. Apart from these main characters, the papers preserved in the archive provide information on other members of the family, as well as on other prominent households of Lesbos, with whom the Kourtzis family was connected both through kinship and professional interests.¹⁰ Seen from this perspective, the Kourtzis archive provides us with a glimpse into the social and economic world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie in Mytilene.

The present study focuses on the period between 1881 and 1892 when, following her marriage to Panos Kourtzis, Myrsinio moved to Constantinople, staying in touch with her relatives through frequent exchange of letters. Myrsinio's personal correspondence with her kin and members of the extended family provides us with valuable information about the family life and the everyday concerns of the wealthy urban family of Mytilene, active on the social and economic stage.¹¹ At the same time, the reconstruction of the past through feminine correspondence allows us, as historian Maria Stamatogiannopoulou pointed out, to better understand the links between people and to investigate on a deeper level "the context in which people move, think and act."¹² Furthermore, by comparing the ways of life, the Kourtzis papers offer the scholars the opportunity to detect the common trends or variations that may exist at the level of mentalities and cultural influences between the Vassileiou family¹³, which belongs to the local elite of Mytilene and their daughter Myrsinio, who lives in the Ottoman capital.

At this point, some observations on the structure and content of these letters are in order. The correspondence between the members of the Kourtzis and Vassileiou families follows the more general conventions of letter-writing in this period, replete with stereotypical expressions at the beginning and at the end of each letter.¹⁴ One should not be

⁸ Konnaris, "Archeio Kourtzi," 27.

⁹ Maria Stamatogiannopoulou, "O kosmos ton gynaikon: paradosi kai neoterikotita sti Mytilini kata to telos tou 19ou aiona (eisagoniki meleti stin idiotiki allilografia tou Archeiou Kourtzi)," in *Archeio Kourtzi: istoriki tekmiriosi*, ed. Kristis Konnaris (Mytilene, 2007), 96-131.

¹⁰ Kristis Konnaris, "Archeio Kourtzi," 27.

¹¹ Stamatogiannopoulou, "O kosmos ton gynaikon," 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, 97.

¹³ For information about this eminent family see Evridiki Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki kai koinoniki istoria (1840-1912)* (Mytilene, 2016); Stamatogiannopoulou "O kosmos ton gynaikon," *passim*.

¹⁴ Stamatogiannopoulou, "O kosmos ton gynaikon," 103.

surprised by the lack of originality that characterizes these letters. However, the variety of the subjects we find in the letters is impressively rich. Health issues, eating habits, child-raising issues, clothing and new consumer practices, upcoming engagements and marriage strategies, leisure time and recreation seem to monopolize the interest of the women of the Vassileiou family.¹⁵

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN MYTILENE DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Covering an area of over 1,600 square kilometers, Lesbos¹⁶ is one of the largest Greek islands located in the northeastern Aegean Sea. In the late Ottoman period, the island constituted a district (*sancak*) within the province (*eyalet*, and after 1864 reform, *vilayet*) of the Archipelagos. The *sancak* of Lesbos was subdivided into three *kazas* of Mytilene, Kalloni, and Molivos.¹⁷ Of the three, Mytilene, the economic and cultural center of the island but also the administrative seat of the Ottoman political and military officials of the time, became the administrative capital of Lesbos.

Lesbos' development during the nineteenth century was undoubtedly driven by a variety of factors. Historians have repeatedly stressed Lesbos' proximity to the Anatolian coast and Dardanelles Straits in order to highlight the island's privileged geographic position from antiquity to modern times.¹⁸ Moreover, special emphasis must be placed on the historical conjecture of the period. Lesbos' move towards urbanization and modernization cannot be studied apart from the general political, economic and social Ottoman context.

The eighteenth century marked a turning point in the history of world economy, with a profound impact on the sultans' "well-protected domains." This period saw the consolidation of the patterns of trade between Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire that had been in the making since the late sixteenth century. Within this new commercial order, the Ottoman Empire became a source of foodstuff imports and raw materials, exchanged for manufactured and colonial products.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 102.

¹⁶For Lesbos' history and economic development see the well-documented studies by Stratis Anagnostou, "I oikistiki exeliki tis Lesvou (1462-1912): I metavasi apo ton agrotiki synkrotisi tou horou stin astiki diarthrosi tou" (Ph.D. diss., Aegean University, 2004), and Sifneou, *Lesvos oikonomiki, passim*.

¹⁷During the nineteenth century the *kazas* of Kalloni was abolished, while in 1880 the *kazas* of Plomari and Moschonisia were established as separate administrative unit.

¹⁸Ioannis D. Kontis, *Lesvos kai I Mikrasiatiki periohi* (Athens, 1978).

¹⁹ Elena Frangakis-Syrett, *The Commerce of Smyrna in the Eighteenth Century (1700-1820)* (Athens, 1992).

From the eighteenth century onwards, Lesbos joined the wider network of Mediterranean and European commerce, which shifted the island's economy towards a monoculture of olives and provided an impulse for the growth of associated industries, mainly the production of olive oil and soap. However, oil exports and commercial ties with the hub of Marseille were incidental rather than systematic, on the one hand due to Ottoman government's repeated embargos on the exports of olive oil abroad and, on the other hand, due to the deteriorating social and economic conditions in post-1789 Revolutionary France.²⁰

However, despite the lack of any sort of "commercial and social dynamism" in Lesbos during this period, this rudimentary export trade with Marseille led to the rise of a new social group in Mytilene, which began to play an active role in the community affairs through its participation in the city's communal administrative system. This trading group is considered the forerunner of a new bourgeoisie, which emerged half a century later.²¹

The process of urban transformation and westernization in Lesbos and particularly in its capital, Mytilene, was accelerated during the nineteenth century. Two major events played a crucial role in this development. The conclusion of the Anglo-Ottoman commercial Treaty of Baltalimanı in 1838 granted British traders the same rights as their local counterparts, thus ushering the period of Ottoman economy's closer integration with the European capitalist system and the abolishment of all imperial monopolies.²² The following year, the proclamation of the Gülhane Edict initiated the Tanzimat reform program, aiming at a general overhaul of the Ottoman polity along Western models.²³

The period between 1840 and 1880 witnessed a series of spectacular changes in the local economic and social life. The agrarian and self-sufficient economy was gradually transformed into an international commercial economy relying on exports of local agricultural products, the introduction of western machines in the countryside, modern banking, and maritime activities.²⁴ Furthermore, the abolition of the oil-trading monopoly, which until then was the privilege of the Ottoman governor, was a decisive step in the formation of the island's Greek Orthodox bourgeoisie²⁵, whose economic power derived

²⁰ Anagnostou, "I oikistiki exeliki tis Lesvou," 236.

²¹ Ibid., 236.

²² Şevket Pamuk, *Ottoman Empire and European Capitalism: 1820-1913* (Cambridge, 1983).

²³ Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki*, 52.

²⁴ Ibid., 91-193.

²⁵ For the formation of bourgeoisie in the Ottoman context, see Haris Exertzoglou, "Investments and Investment Behavior in the Ottoman Empire: The Development of a Greek-Ottoman Bourgeoisie, 1850-1914", *Ottoman Greeks in the Age of nationalism: politics, economy, and society in the nineteenth century*, ed. Dimitris Gondicas and Charles Issawi (Princeton, 1999), 89-115, and Fatma Müge Göçek, *Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change* (New York, 1996).

from “a single circle of activities which spanned from the land and oil to usury including such enterprises as modern industrial facilities and trading houses with branches abroad.”²⁶

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Mytilene was transformed into “a significant trade center and future core of the island’s industrialization.”²⁷ The introduction of new technologies gave new impetus to agricultural production. Productivity and exports increased as a result. Industrial plants such as olive presses and soap factories began to appear. Endowed with financial power and lured by the European habits and life-styles, the emergent bourgeoisie, engaged in both entrepreneurial and banking activities merged with the landowner class, coalescing into a new local elite that dominated Lesbos’ political and economic life. At the same time, some of the ambitious Mytilian businessmen migrated to Constantinople, Smyrna, Russia, Romania, Egypt, and Marseille to expand their financial activities.²⁸

The rise of the bourgeois class was very much linked to the radical transformation of the urban image of the city.²⁹ Throughout the nineteenth century Mytilene experienced – as many other Ottoman port cities - a striking demographical growth. The neighborhoods of Mytilene were ethnically organized. Christians, the largest group, lived in the southern part of the city, while Muslims lived in the north. Foreign merchants and consuls lived in the “French quartier” near the neighborhood called *Kioski*.³⁰

Besides, a series of natural disasters³¹, such as fires and earthquakes, also played a major role in restructuring the city’s urban fabric.³² New urban practices were established, and new buildings were constructed.³³ Major infrastructure works took place during this era, which also witnessed the construction of grandiose and costly public. In the aftermath of these transformations, Mytilene projected the image of a modernized and westernized city. Along with the public buildings, majestic mansions were also built, either as main or country residences for the island’s bourgeois, and rich expatriate communities mainly from Istanbul, Egypt and Russia.

Finally, the construction of a decent road network and the improvement of maritime transportation system with the advent of steamships both facilitated the connection of Mytilene with the Lesbian hinterland, the Anatolian coast, and Constantinople. Situated at the crossroads of Istanbul-Alexandria and Marseille-Piraeus-Smyrna sea lanes, nineteenth-century Mytilene grew into one of the empire’s busiest ports. Gradually, Mytilene became an important waypoint for all shipping companies, with transit trade becoming the linchpin

²⁶ Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki*, 334.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁸ *Idem.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-96.

³⁰ Anagnostou, “I oikistiki exelixa tis Lesvou,” 273.

³¹ Zannis P. Kampouris, *Theominies sti Lesvo ton 190 aiona* (Mytilene: 1978).

³² Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki*, 94.

³³ *Ibid.*, 95.

of the island's economy. Apart from being Lesbos' main shipping hub, Mytilene also supplied secondary ports on the Anatolian coast, such as Ayvalı, Hadramut, and Dikili. The connections became even more frequent with the growth of foreign trade, linking the island with the ports of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.³⁴

THE ADOPTION OF WESTERN CULTURE AND LUXURY CONSUMPTION

Western influence on “our near East” was, according to Haris Exertzoglou, systematic enough as to establish a new framework of identity formation for the Christian elites of the Ottoman Empire.³⁵ Culture became associated with concepts originating from the West, and the adoption of European lifestyle became the primary means to accumulate social capital, accompanied by specific consumption practices³⁶ and identified with specific social groups and, more specifically, with the rise of the bourgeoisie.³⁷ In this context, the Greek bourgeoisie that emerged in Mytilene in the second half of the nineteenth century asserted their new social status, displaying those elements of western novelty³⁸ that differentiated them from the other social strata and ensured their newly-found prestige.³⁹

But what were those elements which western novelty consisted of, and therefore served as the criteria that differentiated the bourgeoisie of Mytilene from the other social classes?⁴⁰ The main element in the social differentiation of the bourgeoisie from the lower classes was their clothing. The traditional folk costume of the women of Mytilene was gradually abandoned when French clothing was introduced to the island. Our information regarding the traditional women's costume of Lesbos comes mainly from the dowry contracts of the eighteenth and nineteenth century and the testimonies of foreign travelers. From these sources, we learn that there was no unified model for women's outfits, but rather a considerable variation from one area to another.⁴¹

³⁴Anagnostou, “I oikistiki exeliki tis Lesvou,” 76; Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki*, 74, 233.

³⁵Haris Exertzoglou, *Ek Dysmon to fos? Exellinismos kai Orientalismos stin Othomaniki Afokrotoria (mesa 1900-arches 2000 aiona)* (Athens, 1996), 46-51.

³⁶ For the notion of consumption and its multiple symbolic uses in the Ottoman Empire, see *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1922, An Introduction*, ed. Donald Quataert (New York, 2000).

³⁷ Haris Exertzoglou, *Ek Dysmon to fos?*, 47, 145.

³⁸ On western novelty and its cultural uses see Haris Exertzoglou, “The Cultural Uses of Consumption: Negotiating Class, Gender and Nation in the Ottoman Urban Centers during the 19th century,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35, no. 1 (2003): 77-101.

³⁹ Exertzoglou, *Ek Dysmon to fos?*, 147-151.

⁴⁰ On this issue, see Maria Anagnostopoulou, *I lesviaki foresia* (Mytilene, 1996).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 33

In Mytilene, the traditional attire of the women in the nineteenth century had as its main element the dress called *foustani* or *f'stan* (from Turkish *fistan*).⁴² As Maria Anagnostopoulou points out, the dress consisted of a skirt with thick and narrow unpressed pleats, supported with a thin belt on the waist. Under the dress, the women of Mytilene wore undergarments of “large four-paneled petticoats, adorned with embroidery” to keep the skirt puffed. This outfit was complemented by the long silk shirt, open at the chest, with wide sleeves, the bust, which was a small sleeveless vest fitted to the upper part of the dress supporting the chest, and finally the *kamikoziōr libade*, a type of short fitted jacket with rich decoration.⁴³ In the winter, the women wore the *kontogouni*, which was either a short jacket or a longer fur coat.⁴⁴

The upper social classes, as we would expect, were the first ones to abandon the traditional attire, gradually assimilating European fashion trends. Without doubt, the island's merchants and students – mainly the offspring of prominent families studying in Marseille - who were in close contact with Europe, played a significant role in the proliferation and adoption of European fashion, and so did the publication of fashion magazines that upper-class ladies frequently consulted. These magazines were illustrated with numerous dress and purse patterns, jewels, hats, corsets, hair accessories, shoes, fans, gloves, umbrellas, hairdos, as well as men's and children's outfits. Later, we see numerous advertisements in the local press for fashion stores, as their owners tried hard to meet the sartorial demands of the rich bourgeois of Mytilene. A typical example in this respect is the fashion magazine of the St Joseph department stores.⁴⁵

But how did the prominent women of Mytilene procure clothing items of the latest western fashion? It appears that the ladies either ordered the fabrics they wanted from Europe and had their clothes sewn in Mytilene, or – as in the case of the Vassileiou family - they acquired them from the large urban centers of the Ottoman Empire, mainly from Smyrna and Constantinople. As the family's private correspondence reveals, their first-born daughter, Myrsinio, upon her move to the imperial capital became the main recipient of frequent requests from her female kin, asking her for shipment of luxury goods, mainly clothing items. Myrsinio's mother and two younger sisters, Harikleia and Penelope – who wished to benefit as much as possible from her stay in the Ottoman capital – ordered not only dresses tailored according to the latest fashion but also hats, jewelry and shoes. In one

⁴² It appears that in the northern and north-eastern part of the island of Lesbos, as well as the town of Mytilene, women preferred to wear the dress (*foustani*) and not the *salwar* worn in other regions. Of course, in some cases we observe that the two types of outfits coexisted, and we find *salwar* (*vraka*) in areas where *foustani* dominated, especially among the labor class, Anagnostopoulou, *I lesviaki foresia*, 70.

⁴³ Ibid, 33.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki*, 320.

of such letters, Efthymia asked her first-born daughter to order “two hats, one for Harikleia and one for Penelope. I won’t tell you the specific color, as you can find out what is the most popular color and shape nowadays, and have it made like that.”⁴⁶ Apparently, on several occasions, Myrsinio sent fabric swatches - without providing exact descriptions of the fabric or quality – for her mother, who responded “I received the swatches and I thank you dearly for your effort. I liked one of them, which I enclose, along with the lining.”⁴⁷

Although, according to a common saying “clothes do not make the man,” there was no doubt that clothes “revealed the man.” Thus, the European fabrics and clothes offered their owners multiple advantages, since – by subscribing to European fashion trends - Harikleia and Penelope played an important role in maintaining, if not enhancing, the family’s social standing in the local society.

Myrsinio considered the French style and sophistication an asset, as did the majority of upper-class women. In a letter to her sister Harikleia, in June of 1892, she noted that there were not many women in London who dressed tastefully, in contrast to Paris, where one was more beautiful than the other, and she continued “yesterday we went to the woods frequently visited by the finest people of London [...] And during this walk we did see fine, but not so beautiful, people [...]”⁴⁸

Living in Istanbul and mingling with the capital’s elite, Myrsinio spent large amounts of money for cashmere, silk and velvet fabrics, furs, ribbons, lace, hats, shoes, fans, dresses, gloves for herself and her husband. As one can read in her personal expenses book, where she recorded all her expenses in detail, in August of 1883, Myrsinio paid Justine, a dressmaker, for mending three of her dresses, the amount of 216 *kuruş*, at a time when an *okka* (1,280 grams) of sugar at the time cost mere five *kuruş*. A visit to the dentist at the same time meant an expenditure of twenty *kuruş*, while Myrsinio’s shoes with galoshes cost ninety-four *kuruş*. In June of 1884, the same dressmaker received 540 *kuruş* for five dresses, almost four times as much as nanny’s salary. In October the following year, Myrsinio paid 60 *kuruş* for a travel dress, about 90 *kuruş* for luxury fabrics, and only 20 *kuruş* to his gardener. Next month, Mrs. Kourtzis’ expenses for garments and accessories included 486 *kuruş* spent on a dress and two coats, twenty *kuruş* for her husband’s gloves and 108 *kuruş* for an umbrella for Panos, whereas a ten-day wage to Efthymia, for ironing Kourtzis’ clothes amounted to sixty *kuruş*.⁴⁹

The importance that wealthy women placed on their clothing as an indication of their social position is clearly reflected in the request to Myrsinio, which Efthymia Vassileiou made in May of 1885, to send her hats she had ordered for her two younger daughters “this

⁴⁶ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0669

⁴⁷ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0663

⁴⁸ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT1054

⁴⁹ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0064

week, because they have no others to wear when they go out.”⁵⁰ Penelope made a similar request in her letter of April 1888, asking her older sister to send her “this week” the hat she had sent for repair, as well as the shoes she had ordered since she was planning to go and pay some social visits:

Myrsinio, I ask you kindly to take care of mending the hat and sending it to me. As you know, I don't have another one, and I need it; as for the shoes you tell me it is true that they are very expensive and as you tell me the heels are low, I do not like them so if you can please look somewhere else and send it together with the hat because I need them. Please send them this week because I want to visit certain relatives' houses as well as the hat.⁵¹

These social calls and pleasant walks in the countryside⁵² constituted convenient loci for the display of consumer goods, and therefore arenas for young girls on the local wedding “market” to compete with one another. In a letter dated 22 May 1888, Penelope Vassileiou informed her sister that she impressed her girlfriends when she appeared wearing her new dress and recounted the competition between the young girls, which went as far as sartorial espionage. Penelope's friends used an experienced seamstress, Mrs. Theodora, as their spy to try to copy the dresses she had received from Constantinople:

I forgot to tell you about Mrs. Theodora's tricks. After having seen me in that dress she immediately came to the house and asked to see it, as well as all the others, but it appears that the other girls put her up to it. I told her that you had not sent me the others yet, so she was asking for this one and kept coming back, three days in a row.⁵³

The orders from Constantinople, however, also had the purpose of putting together the dowry for the girls of the family.⁵⁴ Marriage at the time was an indirect way to increase one's wealth. The upper classes of Mytilene, in particular, tried to protect their economic and social status by following the strategy of cross-marriages with members of other prominent families of the island.⁵⁵ The dowry which, apart from cash, included jewelry, furniture, clothing, and household items, reflected the social position of the bride's family and therefore constituted

⁵⁰ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0666

⁵¹ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0709

⁵² GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0706

⁵³ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0705

⁵⁴ For the institution of dowry and the habit of endowment in the island of Lesbos see Maria A. Anagnostopoulou, *I kentitiki sti Lesvo (180s-200s ai.)* (Athens, 2004) and Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki*, 150-180 and 288-304. Especially for the church's opposition relatively to the use of extremely expensive embroideries and clothing for the dowries of the daughters see Maria A. Anagnostopoulou, “Rythmistikes apofaseis gia ta ethima tou gamou sti mitropolitiki eparhia Mytilinis kata ton 18o ai.,” *Lesviaka* 16, (1996): 5-16.

⁵⁵ Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki*, 168.

yet another area for competition and conspicuous consumption.⁵⁶ Therefore, the Vassileiou family matriarch ordered ready-made dowry items from seamstresses in Constantinople.⁵⁷ She particularly stressed that she wanted the pillows to have nice “four-lira” designs and to bear the firm’s mark.⁵⁸

In contrast to the luxurious garments that made their way from the Ottoman capital to “provincial” city of Mytilene, food parcels traveled in both directions. Kinsmen in Mytilene supplied Panos and Myrsinio with local products, such as chests with olives, quinces, traditional sweets, lamb, milk, and cheese made by Efthymia Vassileiou, while Myrsinio sent back home candies, strawberries, caviar, and butter.⁵⁹

Moreover, the papers contain information about the domestic equipment of the Kourtzis family. Myrsinio thoroughly inventoried dinner sets and cutlery, the silverware, towels and bedding linen in her houses in Constantinople and Mytilene. More precisely, in 1883 the list with her used silverware at her house at Constantinople comprises eight small fruit forks, seven stewed fruit spoons, eight small knives, nine soup spoons, eight forks, eight large knives, a pilaf spoon, a soup ladle, two nutcrackers, nine coffee cups, fifteen dessert spoons, two champagne buckets, two silver candlesticks, a sugar bowl and other items. The domestic equipment also included towels, napkins, tablecloths of different quality and colors, big bolsters, and *mahramades*.⁶⁰ Finally, she noted in detail the loss of some pieces of her dinner sets, cutlery, and dishes she brought from Europe.⁶¹

Apart from their economic rise, the rich bourgeois of Mytilene also tended to their intellectual aspirations. They were cosmopolitans, fluent speakers of foreign languages, reading books of Greek classical and world literature, as well as magazines and newspapers from Istanbul, Smyrna, and European cities. For example, Alexandros Vassileiou, in a letter dated May 1882, asked his sister Myrsinio to send him from Constantinople collected works by Achilleas Paraschos and D. Paparigopoulos, which he required but was unable to find in Mytilene.⁶² Moreover, several years later, in a family expenses book that belonged to the family of Eleni Karamanou, Panos Kourtzis’ sister, one can find an entry regarding

⁵⁶ For bourgeois women’s consumption and its symbolic meaning see Leora Auslander, “The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France,” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley, 1996), 79-112.

⁵⁷ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0670, GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0672, GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0667, GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0661.

⁵⁸ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0671

⁵⁹ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0711 and GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0705

⁶⁰ Mahramades were long towels of various lengths, most of which are white or red, of linen and silk. For the embroidery and growth of needlework in the island of Lesbos see Maria A. Anagnostopoulou, *I kentitiki sti Lesvo*, 19-63.

⁶¹ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0064

⁶² GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT1891

subscriptions to the newspaper *Amaltheia* and the magazines *Paidikos Kosmos* and *Filokalos Penelope*, as well as expenses for tutors and books of music, and language lessons in English, French, Turkish, and German.⁶³

In this context, two additional signifiers of European cultural influence appear in the daily life of the Greek bourgeoisie: the piano and the knowledge of French language.⁶⁴ A letter from Myrsinio to her mother dated 22 November 1881 informs us that two months after her move to Constantinople, Panos Kourtzis' wife had already acquired a piano, and asked her mother to send her books with the piano pieces as soon as possible, since she was upset that she could not play as she could not remember them by heart.⁶⁵

However, a further reading of the letter reveals that it was not only Myrsinio who spent time learning to play the piano. Her younger sister Penelope, who remained on the island and was a member of the local elite followed her elder sister's footsteps. Myrsinio remarked that "if Penelope needs three-four pieces [from the book, she can] write down their names, so I copy them and send them back to you."⁶⁶ It is thus, clear that piano acquired a particular cultural and social allure both in the Ottoman capital and in the imperial periphery, becoming a symbol of cultural status and the economic power of its owner and user.

Good knowledge of French similarly became a hallmark of good manners adopted by the upper classes in this period. For male bourgeois, French constituted the basic working language; in turn, women considered it primarily a language of culture. As we can judge from the existing correspondence, Panos Kourtzis was fluent in French, while Myrsinio's brothers Mihailos and Alexandros studied in Marseille.⁶⁷ They were by no means exceptions in this respect, as attending university in Europe, and particularly the Commercial School of Marseille was a standard practice for Lesvian eminent families.⁶⁸

In one of his letters to Myrsinio from 1882, Alexandros expressed his joy at seeing her person, and having a French lesson together,⁶⁹ while in a letter to his brother-in-law he

⁶³I would like to thank Mrs. Maria Grigora for this information.

⁶⁴ For the piano and French as elements of social distinction and membership of a group, see Vintilă-Ghițulescu, "Curls and Forelocks," 135-137.

⁶⁵ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT 1923

⁶⁶ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT1910

⁶⁷ Stamatogiannopoulou, "O kosmos ton gynaikon," 126.

⁶⁸ A good example is the Kampouris family, whose sons Panagiotis and Nikolaos also studied in the Commercial School at Marseilles. Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki*, 275.

⁶⁹ GR HAA FO 0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT 1891

emphasized that all his classmates from Mytilene had gone abroad a long time ago, and asked Panos to intercede with his father to change the latter's mind about studying in Europe.⁷⁰

As we learn from the correspondence, in 1885 Alexandros had already started learning French. In one of his letters to Myrsinio, he noticed: "I have also started learning French, which I have wanted to do for a long time. However, it seems that I will not make much progress since my teacher is very unskilled."⁷¹ Alexandros was eventually allowed to leave abroad, and in 1887 he wrote to his sister from Marseille: "I am learning the language, so the money is not spent in vain [...] I live the life of a student."⁷²

Mastering French was also the great ambition of Myrsinio's sister, Penelope. Penelope's effort to learn French and piano⁷³ is undoubtedly part of the general program of education followed by young girls of the eminent families of Lesbos. Therefore, it seems that young Penelope did her best to follow Myrsinio's steps and perceived her older sister as a role model.

Another essential element of the identity of the bourgeoisie that emerged in Mytilene, as well as the symbol of its hegemony, was residential housing. Traders, industrialists, bankers, and land owners, would invest their funds in buying land and building lavish residences, thus showing off their wealth and high social status. Panos and Myrsinio Kourtzis owned two houses. Their main residence, located on Isavron Street in the historical center of Mytilene, was purchased by Panos in 1884 and renovated in the Constantinople style in the 1890s.⁷⁴ According to the typology by Ioanna Sotiriou-Dorovini, the Kourtzis' residence displays the main features of 'middle-period' houses, while at the same time retaining elements of the early period. More specifically, we can discern four storeys, three belonging to the main residence, and a fourth one used as auxiliary, including a loft and the single-storey wing of the elevated ground floor on the garden side, where the kitchen, laundry room, and cellar were located. The ground floor is divided into two sections, and the other levels three parts. The residence has a fully-fitted bathroom and two water closets.⁷⁵

The summer residence of the Kourtzis couple, known as the Midhat Villa, was located in the *Epano Skala* neighborhood and was purchased in 1880. In his application to the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Protection in 1925, in which he requested compensation

⁷⁰ GR HAA FO 0001.SF0004.FI0001.IT 1896

⁷¹ GR HAA FO 0001.SF0004.FI0002. IT 0608

⁷² GR HAA FO 0001.SF0004.FI0001.IT 1887

⁷³ GR HAA FO 0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT 1926

⁷⁴Konnaris, "ArcheioKourtzi," 25.

⁷⁵Ioanna Sotiriou Dorovini, *I architektoniki ton katoikion tis anoteris astikis taxis tis Mytilinis (1850-1930)* (Athens, 2001), 112.

for the destruction from the fire at the Midhat Villa, Panos Kourtzis provided us with an eloquent description of the splendor and luxury the building represented:

The residence, known as the MIDHAT Turkish Mansion of historical value, with its luxurious relief ceilings, details of pure gold, consisted of twenty-five large rooms on two floors, with all required installations for kitchen, laundry rooms, bathrooms etc., surrounded on all sides by a large garden, used to serve as my residence until 1916 [...] The building, as well as its numerous valuable furnishings and appliances, which remained locked in four large rooms upon the building's requisition, were exposed to fire risk.⁷⁶

Finally, another criterion of differentiation among the urban and the other social classes of Mytilene was the employment of servants. Evridiki Sifneos points out that the employment of young girls in wealthy urban households freed the rural family from the need to provide food, clothing, and dowry to at least some of their female offspring, while at the same time provided the latter with an opportunity to improve their future.⁷⁷ From the revenues-expenses notebook kept by Myrsinio, we learn that the Kourtzis had three female servants (Marigo, Milia, and Harikleia), a steward, a certain “old Yiannis,” and a nanny.⁷⁸

We also learn from Myrsinio’s correspondence with her mother that several female servants in Kourtzis’ household in Constantinople originated from Mytilene.⁷⁹ Efthymia sent her daughter servants that she considered trustworthy, as well as candidate nannies to help Myrsinio with managing the households and raising Mitsas. Mother and daughter’s criteria for the choice of servants – referred to as “slave” in Efthymia’s letters – seem to have differed, and Myrsinio did not hesitate, despite her mother’s good word, to send back to Mytilene, a candidate servant that had not satisfied her needs.⁸⁰

Meanwhile, Efthymia also found a nanny from Lesbos for her daughter and grandson. In one of her letters, she described the perfect nanny as a woman without a husband and thus ready to move to Constantinople, and who had given birth mere five days after Myrsinio and had plenty of nutritional milk, since her baby was growing well. Furthermore, the candidate had one more advantage, as she could live in the household and

⁷⁶I would like to thank Maria Grigora for providing me this information.

⁷⁷Sifneos, *Lesvos oikonomiki*, 316.

⁷⁸ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT064, mentioned in Stamatogiannopoulou, “O kosmos ton gynaikon,” 120-121.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 121.

⁸⁰ GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0679 and GR HAA FO0001.SF0004.FI0002.IT0677, see also Stamatogiannopoulou, “O kosmos ton gynaikon,” 121.

helping with the household affairs. Moreover, since Efthymia did not consider the nanny particularly good-looking, she considered her no threat to Myrsinio's family life.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

The town of Mytilene and its port undoubtedly played a crucial role in the formation of financial capital and social status of several eminent families of the island, one of them being the Kourtzis family. As an outlet for the local agricultural products and related industry, the port of Mytilene was connected to other ports of the Mediterranean world (Trieste, Constantinople, Smyrna, and Alexandria) as well as Western Europe and Russia. From this perspective, the history of the Kourtzis family reflects the gradual transformation of a local agrarian economy, which was mainly based on the monoculture of olive, into a globalized commercial and financial economy.

The Kourtzis family papers provide researchers with valuable information on the entrepreneurship and everyday life of a wealthy bourgeois family. Although a comprehensive study of the Lesbian society would require a more in-depth study of the families that made up the emerging bourgeoisie of Mytilene in the second half of the nineteenth century, is clear that the archive accounts for a fascinating case study, providing us with a “compass for mapping out the profile of the majority of businessmen, bankers and other Greek Orthodox financial actors in the Ottoman Empire at that time.”⁸²

But what can the Kourtzis family papers tell us about the emerging consumer behavior in the late-nineteenth-century Mytilian bourgeoisie? Comparing Efthymia Vassileiou's letters with those of Myrsinio and her sisters, it is possible to identify two different and somewhat contradictory value systems that differentiate the two generations, intricately entangled in the political, socio-economic, and cultural changes that took place during the nineteenth century in the Ottoman Empire in general, and on the island of Lesbos in particular.

European material goods such as furniture, clothing, porcelains, and expensive musical instruments were the first sign of the penetration of western influence in the society of Mytilene. As historians of consumption and social scientists have noted material goods could carry a wide range of meanings. In the words of Elisabeth Wallace, consumer objects not only conveyed status but quickly “became an expression and guide to social

⁸¹ GR HAA FO0001.SFO004.FO002.IT 1918 also mentioned in Stamatiogiannopoulou, “O kosmos ton gynaikon,” 122.

⁸² Maria Mandamadiotou, *The Greek Orthodox Community of Mytilene between the Ottoman Empire and the Greek State, 1876-1912* (Bern, 2013), 50.

identity.”⁸³By adopting European fashion, playing the piano, and learning French, Myrsinio Kourtzis and her sisters managed not only to highlight existing social boundaries and differentiate their social position from other social classes, but also mark their elevated position within the ranks of local elite. In other words, the Vassileiou family gained a lot of clout through the marriage alliance with the Kourtzis family. Moreover, several commodities mentioned above were successfully employed by Harikleia and Penelope Vassileiou as vehicles for forging new marriage alliances with members of other eminent families of Mytilene.

⁸³ Elisabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1997), 6.