

# KNOW-HOW OF CULTIVATING MASTIC ON THE ISLAND OF CHIOS

**Key-words:** mastic, Mastic Villages, traditional cultivations, local products, ethnobotanic knowledge

## **Brief presentation**

The pistacia lentiscus shrub, which grows in south Chios, and from which is extracted an aromatic resin called mastic, has been renowned since the Middle Ages for its properties and multiple uses. The production of mastic, an ancient practice unaltered over time, impacts the social structure and cultural landscape of 24 Mastic Villages where the product is exclusively extracted. Traditional cultivation is a representative element of Chios, strengthening the bonds of local society, while giving the residents of the Mastic Villages a distinct identity. The residents are aware of their multiple cultural heritage.

## **Domain of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

### **Social practices, rituals and festive events**

The element serves as a constitutive tool of community institutions. In 1938, the cultivators founded Primary Cooperatives in each village, which in turn formed the Chios Association of Mastic Growers, operating continuously since that time. This has fully contributed to the cohesion of the community of cultivators, who enjoy direct and indirect representation, the right to speak and collective participation in decision-making through regular meetings.

The cultivators are organized into 20 Primary Cooperatives (per village), whose elected representatives form the Chios Mastic Growers Association founded in 1938, and whose main objective is the “protection of Chios mastic through its systematization, processing and collective provision”. It organizes the agricultural activities of its members, addresses issues of legal protection of mastic, supports research on the shrub, promotes new products, thereby encouraging young farmers whose numbers have increased considerably since 2000.

Moreover, cultivation of mastic sustains the local society. Through the mastic, the community preserves its unique identity, reassesses and rediscovers its traditional values by experiencing them on a daily basis. Rites and customs also

demonstrate this: such as the feast of the Aga during the Carnival, representing the Ottoman collector of mastic and its relationships with the local community.

The cultivation of mastic, much more than traditional know-how, represents an important social experience, around which networks of mutual assistance and alliances are created, and which live on in the vernacular language, traditions and legends – such as the tree that cried upon witnessing the martyrdom of Saint Isidore. In this, the know-how bearers see a link to identity, which stimulates their sense of community.

### **Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe**

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Mastic has forged the natural and cultural landscape of the Mastic Villages, since the 14th century. Located in places not easily visible and far from the sea, these villages were fortified by the Genoese, so they could better control the production and circulation of the product, avoiding threats from pirates and contraband. Until today most of the Mastic Villages that are still inhabited have preserved their architectural character. Some of them are classified as historical monuments by the relevant Ministries.

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### **Traditional craftsmanship**

The know-how of cultivating mastic abides by certain rules that guarantee its traditional features while promoting individuality and improvisation. Each cultivator establishes an intimate relationship with his own mastic trees, through which he attains personal recognition within the community. The collectivity of cultivators creatively invents culinary, medical and cosmetic recipes using mastic, while preserving its traditional secrets. Moreover, they have recourse to documents that reflect recent local history closely linked to the cultivation of

mastic: old photographs, decorative features of mastic villages, old tins or local ceramics. In this way, the bearers of mastic cultivation dialogue with the cultural history of Chios, while stimulating their own creativity.

The role of the president of the Primary Cooperative of each village is important, because at the same time he represents the village community by acting as intermediary between the cultivators and the Association, which is of paramount importance as an institution preserving production, while being a factor of social cohesion.

The Chios Mastic Growers Association has primary responsibility for ensuring the continuity of the methods of cultivating mastic, a role it has played with success to the present day.

### **Place (region, prefecture, municipality)**

The Island of Chios is located NE of the Aegean Sea, 3.5 km off the coast of Asia Minor. Its history is closely linked to mastic, the product of the *Pistacia lentiscus* shrub. Although the same kind of shrub grows elsewhere on the island and throughout the Mediterranean, mastic is extracted only within the 24 Mastic Villages south of Chios, in a mild, dry climate. All efforts to produce mastic north of Chios and elsewhere, in Greece or abroad, have failed, due to unfavourable geological, soil and microclimatic conditions, and because of the know-how of the producers' community.

Chios has nearly 5,000 mastic cultivators, who live in the 24 "Mastic Villages" (Mastihohoria): St Georges, Armolia, Vavyloi, Vessa, Vouno, Elata, Exo Didyma, Tholopotami, Thymiana, Kalamoti, Kallimasia, Katarrakti, Koini, Lithi , Mesa Didyma, Mesta, Mirmingi, Nenita, Neohori, Olympoi, Pagida, Patrika, Pyrgi, Flatsia.

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### **Description**

The cultivation of mastic is a family occupation that requires painstaking care throughout the year. The agricultural activities begin in December-January, with the natural fertilization of the mastic shrub and the pruning of the branches. From mid-June, the ground around the trunk of the tree is cleaned, swept and leveled in order to easily retrieve the mastic. Between July and September there follows the “kentos” (embroidery): using the “kentitiri” (sharp iron tool) to make incisions in the bark of the trunk and main branches.

Once the mastic solidifies, the first harvest takes place after 15 August, beginning with the larger pieces. The mastic is often washed with seawater, placed in wooden boxes and stored in a cool place. It will be carefully cleaned by women, often elderly, working in small groups. Then it will be delivered to the Association of Mastic Growers of Chios, which assembles the entire production, and ensures the processing and international promotion of the mastic and its many derivatives.

Young cultivators are either from families that produced the mastic, bearers of a long tradition, or with no family precedents (recently moved to Chios). In both cases, they are introduced to the skills through oral apprenticeship from experienced producers, because the relationship with the tree must be experienced and cannot be replaced by agricultural manuals.

The older cultivators (men and women) make incisions in the bark to reveal the veins, without irreversibly “damaging” it. Initially, the youngest workers observe the process, then they act themselves, supervised by a community expert who corrects them. And at the same time, the cultivator “teaches” the shrub, which “learns” to produce the resin by means of subtle incisions, thereby reinforcing the bilateral interaction between producer and nature.

Cleaning the product requires agility and experience; women are irreplaceable here. The refined selection of different qualities of mastic, handmade, remains unique, according to producers.

Men and women of all ages participate on equal terms in the different stages of cultivation of the mastic. Tasks are divided for practical reasons: the men ensure the natural fertilization, prune the shrub, and prepare the soil around the trees prior to the incisions. Formerly, shorter women and children extracted the white earth which they spread out around the mastic trees.

Women are most active at harvest time, cleaning and selecting “tears” (pieces of mastic). They preserve the practices of mutual assistance, such as the “daneikes” (those who mutually assist each other, reciprocally). These activities provide an opportunity to perpetuate the collective memory (by the recounting of old tales and stories) and social renewal (by establishing matrimonial networks).

Older persons with experience and patience teach how to make the incisions and harvest the mastic.

Past and current efforts to safeguard the element  
The local economy relies on the cultivation and production of mastic, although it has always been a complementary agricultural task. The post-war financial crisis disrupted the demographic balance of the Mastic Villages, however the Association has always worked for the viability of mastic. It has encouraged the cultivators to plant new shrub, to seek new markets and revive the traditional skills. Very early on it took charge of the processing and promotion of natural mastic and various derivatives.

Since 2000, local authorities energetically promote local products, especially mastic, through the organization of local festivals:

- Agrotourism Festival – Municipal Garden of Chios (Department of Tourism of the North Aegean Region).
- Mastic Festival – Municipality of Mastic Villages & “Progress Association of Emporeio”.

Local environmental and cultural associations organize activities relating to the cultivation of mastic (guided tours, educational seminars, identification of traditional cultivation methods). Since 2007, the initiative of the “Masticulture” Organization based in Mesta aims to familiarize visitors with the cultural heritage of mastic through participatory activities. During the past twenty years, the cultivation of mastic has flourished, demonstrating the potential for the development of the local cultural resources and the environment, within the framework of sustainable development.

Besides the Greek State safeguards the element taking efforts in this regard.

In 1997, the mastic of Chios was awarded the label Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), by Regulation No. 123/1997 (L0224/24-1-97) of the European Union, and was inscribed on the List of Community PDO Products. Product protection is inseparable from its specific geographical environment, including natural and human factors and methods of cultivation and production.

In 1946, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Environment listed several villages and buildings related to mastic cultivation as protected sites and historic buildings (Appendix 3)

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in the framework of the MELINA – Education and Culture Programme ([www.prmelina.gr](http://www.prmelina.gr)), prepared a toolkit which offers students activities to familiarise themselves with the architecture of the Mastic Villages and the daily life of their inhabitants. In 2006, the Environmental Education Centre of Chios (under the Ministry of Education) prepared educational materials, and has since organized activities for school children in the fields and Mastic Villages ([kpe-chiou.chi.sch.gr](http://kpe-chiou.chi.sch.gr)). These activities were financed from European funds.

The Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation (PIOP) conducted a multidisciplinary research project, combining archival, photographic, cinematographic materials and oral testimonies. Following this research, PIOP organized a theme day in Chios (2008). On invitation of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, PIOP participated in the International Exposition Expo 2010 in Shanghai, highlighting the cultivation of mastic and its socio-cultural importance.