

BEEKEEPING IN ATTICA DURING THE OTTOMAN PERIOD (1456–1821): A MONASTIC AFFAIR

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Honey was by far the most famous and best-selling product of Attica during the Ottoman Period. Its production and distribution is significant, not only because of the special conditions formulated both by the period and the region itself, but also because bee-farming was practiced to a rather vast area in Attica. The most prominent source for the study of beekeeping is the accounts of the travelers, who would swarm about Athens from the 17th century and on, looking for traces of its ancient past; in the course of their descriptions, they would never overlook references related to aspects of everyday life of that time. Lately, invaluable information, coming from the Ottoman archives and most precisely from the tax registers, which had detailed records of Attica's product fiscal classifications, has seen the light of publication. However, there is no archaeological documentation for the above practices in Attica, since the rather debased material used in the production line would leave no actual traces, e.g. the barrel shaped basket beehives.

Attica belongs to those regions of the Greek territory that enjoyed a mild rule under the Ottoman domination¹. The peaceful surrender of Athens to the

Turks in 1456 and the granting of local governing privileges and other kinds of freedoms to the Christian population created an advantageous frame of living, which could not be overturned by the pressure or the deviations the Ottomans exercised from time to time. The Athenians and the villagers had the right to elect their own lords and to manage their community's issues. During the 16th century Athens and Attica was in a prosperity climate; it had a healthy economy, grew demographically and at the same time monasticism was thriving and many churches and monasteries were being rebuilt. This 16th century boom withdrew gradually in the 17th and mainly in the 18th century, due to at-large developments and events within the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless the milestone two monastic establishments, the Asomaton Petraki and the Penteli monastery, had managed to turn to the most powerful economic agents of the region.

During the Ottoman times bee-farming production of Attica started or rather continued with the dynamics it already possessed; according to the published tax registers of the Ottoman authorities, Athens produced in 1506 15.000 kilos of honey, whose cost was of 75.000 akce². In 1570 production had risen to 21.600 kilos, and its cost to 151.200 akce³. Two monasteries, that of Kaisariani at mountain Hymettus and the aforementioned Penteli monastery were the actual centers of production. Their honey connected the area of Attica to the Sublime Porte and it is believed to have contributed to the special

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¹ On the history of Athens and Attica under the Ottoman rule two old studies remain valuable: Kambouroglou 1889, 1890 1896. Philadelphus 1902. For a recent account see Karidis 2014.

² Kiel 1992, 420, pl. 4a and b.

³ Kiel 1992, 420, pl. 4a and b.

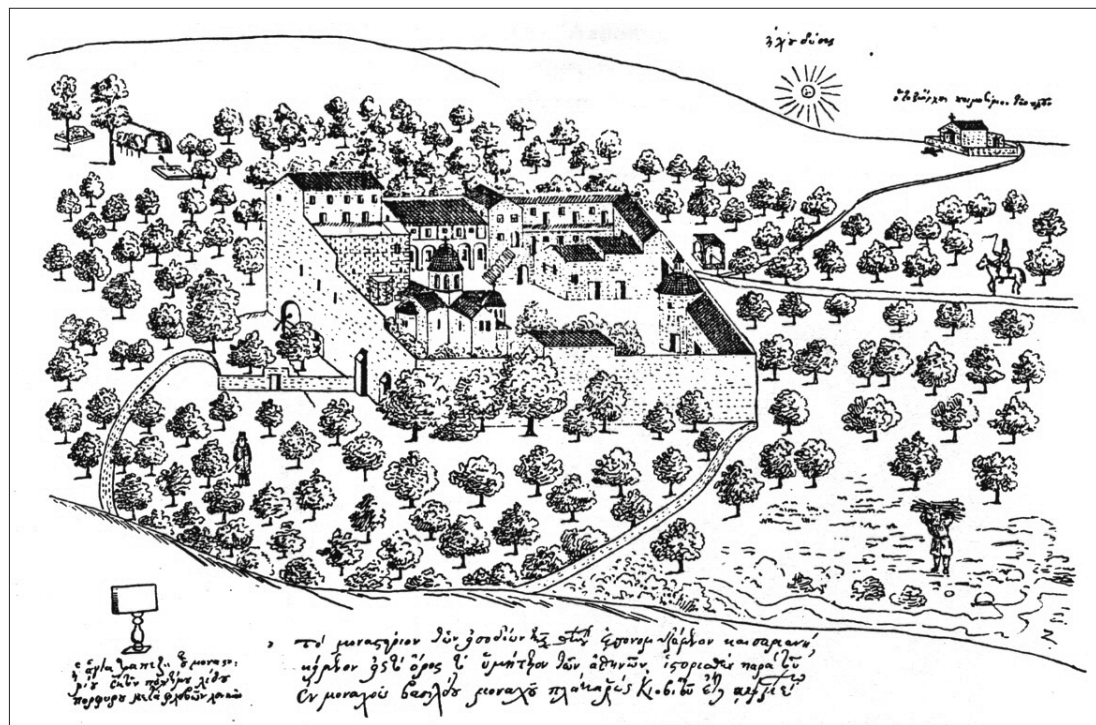


Fig. 1 The monastery of Kaisariani in a sketch of the Russian pilgrim Basil Barskij dated to 1745 (source: A. K. Orlandos, *Μεσαιωνικά μνημεία της πεδιάδος των Αθηνών και των κλιτύων Υμηττού-Πεντελικού-Πάρνηθος και Αιγάλεω*, Athens 1933, 160, fig. 213).

treatment the region benefited of by the Ottoman authorities. The honey's line production, described meticulously by George Wheler, Felix Beaujour and John Hawkins, has already been excessively treated in the studies of Georgios Mavrofridis⁴, leaving no place here for any lengthy commentary.

The monastery of Kaisariani (**Fig. 1**), founded close to a creek up in the mountain Hymettus at the beginning of the 11th century, lived uninterrupted up to beginning the 19th century⁵. Its monks practiced beekeeping systematically from the early 13th century, according to the exiled bishop of Athens Michael Choniatis's letters, which he addressed, a few of them, to the abbot of Kaisariani⁶. The mountain of Hymettus, whose vegetation has been the same since the ancient times, was covered up in aromatic herbs like thyme and produced a famed honey. Clay

beehives of the byzantine period have been tracked in different places all over the mountain⁷.

Beekeeping in Kaisariani must have continued swimmingly even when Attica was under the Ottoman domination, because, according to the legend, its abbot was among the leading personalities working towards the peaceful surrender of Athens. The earliest information about Kaisariani's apiaries can be dated two centuries later after the Ottoman held Athens, and comes from Western travelers' accounts. The French consul Jean Giraud wrote in 1674 that the most famous honey in whole Turkey was produced in Hymettus and that the best of it was made in Kaisariani⁸. Two years later Spon and Wheler would note that in Istanbul there was a high demand for honey produced in Kaisariani and they would go on describing –mainly the latter- its way of production⁹.

⁴ Mavrofridis 2010. Mavrofridis 2012.

⁵ On the history of the monastery and its building complex see Pallis 2009, 333–346, fig. 164–170, with earlier bibliography.

⁶ Lambros 1880, 311.11–18.

⁷ E.g. at the Pani hill, near Alimos (Kaza-Papageorgiou 2006, 143, fig. in page 146).

⁸ Collignon 1913, 415.

⁹ Spon – Wheler 1678, 223–225.

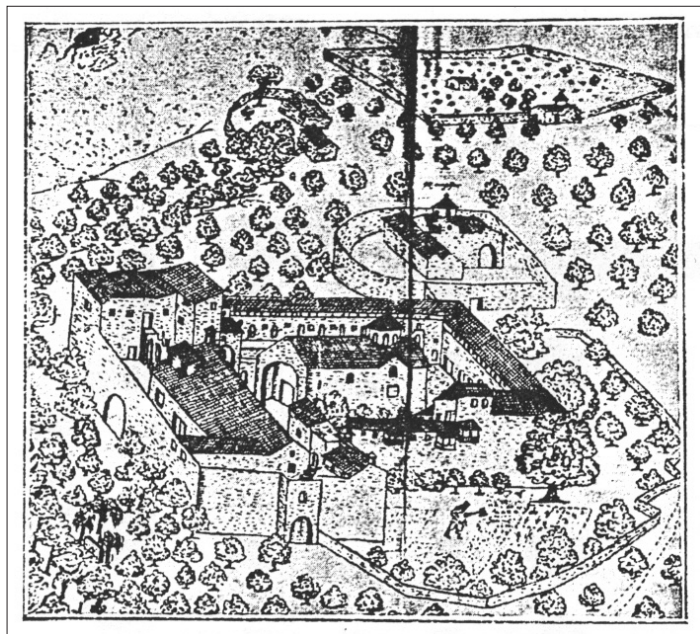


Fig. 2 The monastery of Penteli, in a sketch of the Russian pilgrim Basil Barskij dated to 1745 (source: A. K. Orlandos, *Μεσαιωνικά μνημεία της πεδιάδος των Αθηνών και των κλιτύων Υμηττού-Πεντελικού-Πάρνηθος και Αιγάλεω*, Athens 1933, 188, fig. 252).

However, things for the Kaisariani monastery took an unexpected turn. Albeit the tax exemptions or the affluence of its incomes the continuous maladministration during the 18th century led it on the verge of bankruptcy. The peril of losing its fortune and control over the Turkish authorities was averted, when the Athenian community succeeded to fixate Kaisariani to the local bishopric in 1792¹⁰ – until then the monastery enjoyed its own rule as a stauropegial one. By that year the few apiaries owned, about forty, are sheer evidence that its production had decreased a lot¹¹. The bishops of Athens used ever since the Kaisariani monastery as their own private property and were mainly interested in the gains made by the trade of honey. Already in 1794, Sibthorp wrote that Kaisariani's honey was the bishop's property and its pauper monks, being under austere surveillance, did not even allow him to taste it¹². Soon enough the monastery was turned from a monastic center to a beekeeping unit with its monks as staff. In 1802 Edward Clarke recorded that he had found in Kaisariani «a regular apiary»¹³. The destructions caused by the Greek Revolution of 1821 and the official dismemberment issued by the Greek state in

1833 did not manage to end the eight centuries of beekeeping tradition of Kaisariani, which continued during the reign of king Otto¹⁴.

The great honey production would have needed great storage spaces as well, for which there is only some indirect mention in the travelers' accounts¹⁵. From the surviving till today auxiliary buildings, the northeast wing could have been used as a storage place, because its ground floor is equipped with two great vaulted and shaded chambers¹⁶. Of course such an assumption cannot be proven as a systematic analysis and study of the building is still lacking.

The other important bee-farming center of Attica, the monastery of Penteli on the homonym mountain (**Fig. 2**), was founded in 1578 by the former bishop of Euripus, Timotheos¹⁷. It did not take too long before it turned to one of the wealthiest monasteries of Greece, owed a vast estate property and had many privileges granted by the Ottoman authorities. The first mention ever for the monastery's apiaries was made by the Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi, who passed from

10 Kambouroglou 1891², 134–137. Kambouroglou 1892, 119–122.

11 Kambouroglou 1892, 123.

12 Walpole 1818, 149–150.

13 Clarke 1814, 576.

14 Mavrofridis 2012, 403.

15 In 1805 Edward Dodwell found the monastery's storage spaces clear and filled up (Dodwell 1819, 485).

16 Charkiolakis 1997, 312, fig. 4-5.

17 Pallis 2009, 256–272, fig. 115–124 (with earlier bibliography).

Penteli in 1667¹⁸. A few years later, in 1676, Spon and Wheler visited the monastery; according to them the tax that the monastery had to pay was 6.000 pounds of honey, which was designated for the Valide Sultan's Mosque¹⁹. An extra quantity of pounds in honey was also sent for the same taxation for 5 piaster every quintal. The beehives of the Penteli monastery at an earlier date were believed to have numbered approximately 5.000 pieces, but as late as the late 17th century their number was much smaller. When Penteli annexed the nearby Pantokrator monastery (Daou) in 1692 the owed tax was raised up to an extra 1.000 oka of honey²⁰. Almost a century later in 1794 Beaujour estimated that the Penteli monastery preserved 1.200 beehives approximately, without counting in those of its dependencies²¹, which were scattered and expanded all over Attica. In 1805 the taxation in honey towards the Sublime Porte amounted to 9.000 pounds according to Dodwell, but its quality was slightly lower than that of the Hymettian honey²². Hobhouse on the other hand estimated a lower number for the same taxation, about 6.000 pounds in 1810²³. The abbot's Cyril the II excellent knowledge of every aspect of the bee-farming and honey production, as John Hawkins impressed it upon his text -which was recently noted by George Mavrofridis²⁴- reveal the primary importance beekeeping had for the Penteli monastery.

We do not know under which circumstances Penteli got the privilege of paying its taxes in honey instead of money²⁵. It is also unknown when this privilege was granted, but the fact that it is mentioned by Çelebi in 1667 poses a terminus ante quem, which allows us to place it at the early decades of the monastery's existence. The late granting of the same privilege to the Petraki monastery, which will be discussed next, must have been the result of backstairs actions of its abbots in the ruling courts of the Istanbul, either that of the Sublime Porte or the Patriarchate.

The building units of the Penteli monastery have no clear traces of its formerly great beekeeping activity, because it has been heavily modified during the 19th century and also lately during the 1950's and 1970's. Whatsoever its south wing, the today so-called "Secret school", is equipped with an extended series of vaulted chambers at a lower ground level²⁶, where they could have stored the harvested and valuable product of honey. Its transportation to Istanbul was probably made through the port of Porto-Rafti, the second most important port of Attica after that of Porto-Drako or Leone (the today port of Pireus). The Porto-Rafti port gave an immediate access to the maritime routes to Istanbul, other than being the closer one to the Penteli monastery.

At the end of the 18th century a new important honey producer appeared in Attica, the immensely rich monastery of Asomaton Petraki²⁷. Between the years 1795 and 1796 the monastery succeeded in issuing a decree that would fixate it to the mausoleum of Valide Sultan, managing thus exemption of all taxes with the condition to provide 1.000 oka of honey²⁸. The expansion of its estates up in the mountain of Hymettus must have offered the monastery the ability to gather larger quantities of honey per year. In 1721 the monastery bought a large lot of an ottoman land in the area of Theologos, which included bee-farms as well²⁹. Also of decisive importance was the annexing of two smaller monasteries that practiced beekeeping and in the meantime had gone in decline, losing both their independence and their stauropegial status. The first one was the monastery of Saint John at Kareia, at the southwest slope of mountain Hymettus, founded probably by 1575 or slightly earlier, that turned into a dependency of Petraki in 1777³⁰, while the second one was the monastery of Saint John at Theologos, today at the suburb of Papagou, placed under the control of Petraki since 1702.³¹

Those important monasteries of Attica were the actual centers of honey production, with the contribution of some smaller ones too, for which unfortunately information is still lacking. Beaujour's record that four of the main monasteries of Hymettus

18 Mpires 1959, 59.

19 Spon – Wheler 1678, 310–311.

20 According to the monastery's oral tradition, as it has been recorded by the abbot Kyrillos Dengleris (Kambouroglou 1891², 396).

21 Beaujour 1800, 167–168.

22 Dodwell 1819, 497.

23 Hobhouse 1833, 394. The monks offered to the travelers eggs, olives, honey and wine.

24 Mavrofridis 2012, 400–401.

25 On the role of Pentelic honey in taxation see Michaelaris 2006–2007, 37–40.

26 Pallis 2009, 269–271.

27 Pallis 2009, 221–231, fig. 97–100.

28 Kambouroglou 1891², 369–371.

29 Kambouroglou 1891², 411. Kambouroglou 1892, 176–177, 203–204.

30 Pallis 2009, 380–387, fig. 193–194. Dodwell writes that the best honey of Attica was produced at Kaisariani and Kareas monasteries (Dodwell 1819, 480).

31 Pallis 2009, fig. 180–183.

could maintain 3.000 beehives³², must probably be related to the monasteries of Kaisariani, Kynigou, Kareia and Theologou, still operating by the end of the 18th century, although the latter two were dependencies of Petraki. The majority of the monasteries were at first directly under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople as stauropegial ones and their primal obligation was to send honey to the Patriarchate, as is known from the example of the Penteli monastery, which had to pay «εις σημείον υποταγής, μέλιτος οκάδας εικοσιπέντε, κατά την των σταυροπηγίων συνήθειαν» (“twenty five okas of honey, to show obedience, as the stavropegia are used to do”)³³. It is also noteworthy to mention the record once made by a visitor of the Patriarchate in 1577; he marked that he was offered honey from Attica, almonds and pomegranates as a treat³⁴.

However, beekeeping developed as well and beyond the monastic context by the great landlords, the Athenian small farmers holders and the peasants of Attica. In fact Beaujour lists them as equals to the monasteries when he estimates that their beehives could number up to 6.000 approximately³⁵. Nevertheless, the image we have for the non-monastic production remains rather unclear as the existing information so far is insufficient compared to that of the monastic production. The second in scale land estate after the monastic property, the ottoman chifliks seem to merely have contributed in the honey production of Attica. From the published sources we learn that, before the eve of the Greek Revolution of 1821, the chiflik of Epano Trachones (the today Glyfada) at the SW of Hymettus -located on the most prominent place for such a purpose- had only one bee-farm with no more than 20 to 30 apiaries³⁶. It has to be noted that the chiflik's arable land had been estimated at 10 acres³⁷, which compared to the small number of apiaries it hosted clearly suggests that the latter could be considered as an insignificant activity. In the neighboring chiflik of Kato Trachones a Greek Athenian Symeon Trimis³⁸ maintained two private bee-farms. Close to this area as well was the chiflik of Kara, the today Ilioupolis. Dodwell reported that honey of equal quality to that of Kaisariani was produced in Kara, without elucidating whether he was talking about the homonym chiflik or the nearby,

up in the mountain, monastery of Kareia.

But which was the actual place of the Athenian small farmer holders and mainly the peasants' of Attica in the honey production? The written sources seem frugal in any relevant information. In contracts of the Greek Revolution era, which should be taken to represent the practices during the Ottoman period, we rarely find any mention on bee-farms or apiaries as property's element that could be either dowered³⁹ or distributed⁴⁰. In other sources we meet again sparse testimonies for bee-farms in other places, like in Chaidari⁴¹. However, the case of an arvanites peasant named Buera, who knew all about beekeeping and who was the subject of a record made by John Hawkins at the beginning of the 19th century, along with the case of Cyril from Penteli⁴², are rather striking examples that the rural population of the countryside possessed the traditional practices of beekeeping by which it could complete both its poor nutrition and its low income. In any case, it seems that the production outside the monastic context was quite fragmented between the chifliks, the small farm holders or the landless farmers, fact which actually worked in favor of the organized thus of primary importance production of the monasteries gathering all the greatest amounts of honey.

The whole production of Attica, monastic or private was distributed according to Beaujour at the late 18th century as follows: besides the 1/10 that was consumed in the Athenian market, the rest of it was exported exclusively to Constantinople, to the sultan's palaces and the ruling class. Small quantities of honey from time to time would reach the European markets, most often Marseille and London, which the merchants used to give away to their friends as gift.

The worth of the exported honey from Athens, as Beaujour thinks, could be estimated approximately at 100.000 piaster. For the time being, we have no information about the importance of it as a dutiable good, although such evidence must probably exist in the Ottoman registers. As an indicative example we should mention that the taxation of honey in Andros of the year 1670 would produce one akce every four apiaries, a rather low amount of money⁴³, while the

32 Beaujour 1800, 167.

33 Patriarchal sigillion of 1692, (Lambros 1907, 95).

34 Zolotas 1926, 25.

35 Beaujour 1800, 168.

36 Drikos 1994, 61.

37 Drikos 1994, 64–67.

38 Drikos 1994, 64, 188.

39 Petropoulos 1957, 5 n. 1 (one bee farm), 125 n. 97 (five bee-hives), 177 n. 158 (ten bee-hives).

40 Petropoulos 1957, 544–545 ap. 724 (one bee farm at Γυψέλι and three more of unknown location).

41 Vlachogiannis 1901, 67.

42 Mavrofridis 2012, 401–402.

43 Polemis 1995, 100–101.

same tax in Trikala would produce one akce every one apiary⁴⁴, evidence that relates quality to price.

In conclusion we could say that beekeeping in Ottoman Attica was mainly a monastic affair. The important monasteries would assemble as many beehives and would commit to a well-organized and systematic production. Honey was the medium that would grant them a privileged treatment before the Ottoman authorities with tax exemptions and offer them the opportunity to resolve any domestic or private issues by addressing directly to the high ranking echelon of power –the ease with which

the abbot of the Petraki monastery would travel to Constantinople to reassure that he would issue patriarchal sigillia or firmans by the sultan for their causes is rather striking. This advantageous position had a broader positive impact in the everyday life of the Christian population of Attica, and we could postulate that honey was for Attica what was mastic for Chios. Of course there is still too much to learn about beekeeping in Attica, especially for the part that is connected to the peasants' contribution to the production of honey, so that we can create a fuller image from the one we already have.

44 Michaelaris 2006-2007, 39, n. 15.

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