The Women of Yassihöyük, Turkey: Changing Roles in a New Economy

by Ayşe Gürsan-Salzmann

It is widely acknowledged that women are the mainstay of household operations, especially in rural agricultural communities, and their contributions encompass in large part field labor, food processing, and traditional crafts. In subsistence economies these constitute unpaid, "fill-in" tasks. However, this portrait has been changing rapidly in Turkey in the last 50–60 years, specifically in western and central Turkey. The ethnographic evidence from the Yassihöyük region strongly suggests that as economic strategies changed from labor-intensive subsistence agriculture to mechanized surplus production over a 60-year period, the overall production increased five-fold. This jump, in turn, transformed the labor dynamics within the household and the village.

This article is about the changing roles of women in the household economy, based on my observations and the narratives of village women in the region which I have been studying as part of the ethnoarchaeological component of the Gordion Project (see box).

YASSIHÖYÜK AND ENVIRONS

Yassihöyük is located in central Turkey, 95 kilometers southwest of Ankara, in the district of Polatlı, a town of nearly 70,000 people. The village is on a major highway that follows the course of the 5th century BC Royal Road, extending from Ankara through Polatlı to Eskişehir and farther to the western coast, thus connecting it to a wide network of urban and rural market towns (Figs. 1, 2). A first, fleeting impression of the village is one of stark contrasts: a gleaming harvester in the courtyard of a modest mudbrick house; cattle swaying down the middle of a road; a flock of sheep led by a shepherd with his donkey.
and loyal dog slowly making their way down the main road as a shiny Dodge pickup truck whizzes by. Some children play in the streets with marbles, others ride on home-made wooden carts. The local café is proud to serve imported beer and Scotch, along with homemade bread, yoghurt, and strong Turkish tea.

The regional economy, including that of Yassıhöyük, is mixed; both cereal agriculture and village-based herding of sheep, goat, and cattle are practiced on a household basis (Figs. 3–5). Yassıhöyük is an average-size village, with a population of nearly 450 people in 82 households (the largest village in the region has a population of 1,050). The settlement pattern is dispersed, although related kin live in nucleated neighborhoods, where there is labor cooperation among kin.

Houses are generally one-story buildings of mudbrick (Figs. 6, 8). The house courtyard and byul (a raised platform in front of the entrance to the house proper) are places of daily social interaction for women in the summer. Men socialize at the local café-restaurant adjoining the Gordon Museum, which is regularly visited by tourists in the summer months.

Lining both sides of the paved road in and out of the village are tall poplar, linden, and plane trees. All day long people, geese, chickens, and cattle cross the main street. The tranquility of the village is disturbed by the traffic—cars, trucks, tractors—passing between fields and nearby villages, and the occasional loud barking of large sheepdogs breaking into the night. Centrally placed within the village are the mosque and the nearby cemetery. Both are planted with poplar and juniper trees and are tended regularly by village men and women on a volunteer basis. The only village fountain is multipurpose: it serves for washing wool and as a convenient stop for watering animals before and after grazing.

**Women's Roles in Production**

In Yassıhöyük and surrounding villages, agriculture and herding are primarily in the male domain, while gardening, wool processing, and the domestic cycle of food processing and social events, such as planning weddings and circumcision rituals, are in the domain of women (Fig. 7). Traditionally, the wife of the head of the household, along with her husband, was involved in all stages of heavy agricultural work—plowing, weeding, hoeing, and harvesting. At present, some of those tasks which are not replaced by machinery are largely delegated to married sons, their wives (daughters-in-law), unmarried daughters, or wage laborers. (Some women who are widowed or those with very small plots of land work as wage laborers.) Three areas of production fall under the mother-in-law's control. The primary one is milk processing, which she supervises and works on together with her daughters-in-law, milking the sheep and cattle and producing cheese, yoghurt, cream, and butter (see cover), some of which are sold. Other tasks relate to intensive gardening and handicrafts, and these, too, generate items that may be sold. As a result, women have become part-time entrepreneurs, making marketing arrangements through a network of clients in nearby towns, even as far away as Ankara.

This new scale of activity among women has triggered household-based specialization in foods and crafts and helped to create demand for these products. Generally, food/milk products are the specialty of households who have large amounts of milk; they do not get involved in handicrafts. Among other households, some specialize in tatting (90) and lacemaking, and some in quiltmaking. Thus, some women's unremunerated agricultural labor has been transformed into cash-generating labor that contributes to the household economy.

**Agriculture and Herding**

The rhythm of activities in agriculture and herding follows a precise schedule. From April through June, when all crops are in growth, irrigation, fertilizing, hoeing, and weeding of crops in household gardens and in the fields are underway. The periodic hoeing and weeding are handled by the young girls and women in the household or by wage laborers, the modern village of Yassıhöyük and ancient Gordon are intertwined through time and spatial proximity. The village sits atop the lands of the Phrygian capital where, in 1950, the University of Pennsylvania Museum launched its first large-scale excavation project in central Turkey, under Rodney Young. Since 1988 a new multi-disciplinary program of survey, excavation, environmental studies, and restoration has been in operation, with Mary Voigt as the excavation director and Kenneth Sams, the project director.

I initiated the ethnoarchaeological study at Yassıhöyük in 1994 to help explain, in the light of a living farming society, the underlying factors for economic change in ancient Gordon, a region for which there is a long, continuous sequence of settlements of nearly 3,000 years (Voigt 1997, 2000). The study area encompasses 17 villages within a 35-kilometer radius of Yassıhöyük village (see Fig. 2), thus placing the village in a broader regional context. In the course of eight seasons of work, I documented subsistence-related activities and recorded courtyard plans and structures specifically related to food preparation (Gürsan-Salzmann 1997). The region was surveyed for present land use and for land use in the pre-mechanized period, photographed, and mapped to understand changes in herding versus agriculture and their relative intensities over time. Additionally, over 100 hours of taped interviews, in native Turkish, were gathered. Informants, including farmers and herders at work and at home, men and women, provide an invaluable source of socio-cultural information for current and future studies in the region (Fig. 9).
while the wife and her daughters are engaged in cooking (Figs. 10, 11) and in tending gardens of tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, leeks, zucchini, lettuce, okra, and grape leaves. This is the time to begin processing the milk while it is plentiful. and the women do this until mid August in tandem with gardening and marketing their crops. Sheep shearing is done by the shepherds and the herd owners in mid June, a few weeks before the barley and wheat harvests, to avoid a labor shortage for the harvest. Women sell the washed raw wool at the regional market or within the village to other women who specialize in producing wool-filled mattresses (yastuk) and quilts (sürgün) (Figs. 12, 13).

Following the cereal harvest in late June to mid July, a time when grazing is poor due to the long, dry summers, sheep and goats are let into the stubble. The stubble provides food for two months before the grazing land is replenished by autumn rains. Starting in July and through the end of September, all crops except sugar beet, which is not harvested until December, are sold either to the State Agricultural Office or to individual merchants.

**Voices of Three Women**

I spoke with village women daily about the changes in agricultural/berding activities, as many had participated in them when they were young. They, more than men, appeared to be available for conversation even while engaged in a number of domestic activities—pickling vegetables, making bread, stuffing grape leaves, and supervising weeding and hoeing in the garden. Excerpts from three of my Yassihöyük women informants follow.

Safure Karagöz (see Figs. 12, 13). She spoke on agricultural work in metaphors to make her points clear: "If my husband went to cut wood, I became his ax; when he went to fetch water, I was his copper bucket. I worked with my husband in the field, sometimes he'd say to me, 'please come, stand by me even if you don't work...you give me strength that way.' Sheep were taken by a shepherd, we paid for it. I'd take care of the cow at home, milk it. We also rented some land from another villager.

Fig. 7. A bride and her mother-in-law.

Fig. 9. One of my favorite informants, Ahmet Başar, with his wife Esma at Çekirdek iz village.

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"My husband leaves around 7:00 a.m. daily with the sheep to graze them around the village. We have 120 sheep to be milked. So, that needs to be done before he leaves. As my daughter prepares his breakfast and lunch bag to take with him, I wake up the sheep and get them to pee before I milk them in the next two hours. I get about 40–50 liters of milk a day. Then, my day really begins. Feed the lambs, the sick sheep, and the calves and give them water. I feed them three times a day… I start boiling the milk for yogurt and cheese [three types] which I make every day. I make additional cream and butter as needed by clients.

"The yogurt is for local and house consumption, [she sells it to a local restaurant crew with delicious yogurt every year]. The cheeses, cream, and butter are sold to clients at the Polatlı and Ankara markets; that amounts to about 125 kilograms of cheese per week. I set aside 100 kilograms per year for family consumption, including my married daughters, their families and in-laws. Remember, milk processing lasts only three to three-and-a-half months, and that is our only period of profit.

"In late afternoon, before my husband returns, there is washing, watering the garden, making a meal, and sometimes baking bread, if we are out of it. Naturally, my [unmarried] daughter helps me.

"My three daughters have cut the dung cakes, and now they are left to dry for winter fuel. [The dung is from sheep droppings which have accumulated over six months in the folds.] In early August I already finished making macaroni and jam for the winter, I still have to do tomato paste. I used to make bulgur (bıçak) at home, but now I buy it, as well as the flour. We only grow barley for our animals. Our wealth is in our animals. Winters for women are pretty leisurely, although I help my husband to feed the herd during December to January when they are not taken out to graze.

In one of the distant upland villages, Yazaça, which is 140 kilometers north of Yassıhöyük on the way to Bolu, villagers practice long-distance herding since environmental conditions render agriculture marginal. In summer they move to the high plateau (yozul) with their herds, and live in temporary log cabins during three months. In late fall they move to the plain for winter grazing. On the yozul milk processing is done on a larger scale. Several extended families share the labor in milking and processing cheese (two mothers, two daughters-in-law, three granddaughters). Women are kept busy with diversified tasks, starting at 5:30 a.m.: milking 750 sheep twice a day, production of four varieties of cheese including goat cheese, yogurt, and butter, and processing and storage of meat for winter. Each night, wood stoves are lit to heat the log cabins, as the temperature on the yozul goes down below freezing at night.

The focal point of the pastoral economy is the milk room. This room, which is attached to the main cabin, contains a hearth and artifacts which relate to the production of cheese and butter—a butter machine, numerous copper cauldrons (hele) for boiling milk, plastic trays which contain cheese at different stages of formation—in addition to all the stored foodstuffs, which are kept in tinned copper pots and cauldrons, and a large wooden trough for kneading bread dough. On the outside, several salted sheep stomachs are hung to dry in the sun before being filled with butter. They apparently keep the butter fresh and tasteful for months.

Nazıre Gelecek (see cover photo). "I was a shepherd's daughter. I might say I was born into this life. As a young girl I married into a well-known, traditional shepherd family. In the past, yozul life was harder. We went to the yozul with two or three, one onager, a donkey, and a herd of 750 goats, 750 sheep. Ten days before the focal period (the pastoral economy) brought all the belongings; they made several trips back and forth. It took 5 to 6 hours on horseback from the village. After arrival, male and female lambs were separated, and most of the males were sold. Female lambs which were already 2 months old were separated from their mothers and added to the herd. Sheep and goats were herded separately. We came here in June and left at the end of August for Yazaça village. On the way back, we carried all our cheese and butter in wooden barrels. They fell on the ground sometimes, we washed them and re-stored them. It was tough.

"We have a clear division of labor here: women do milking and processing and cooking. Men herd, bring wood, prepare sheep for milking, but don't milk them. Women also market cheese and butter. In the past, men sold them at Cumayeri, a town between Bolu and Ankara. Now we sell them to clients who come here to buy. In the old days wintertime was the craft season; women in each household spun wool and did weaving of men's clothing, shirts and pants. We knitted wooden socks, made hats. The shepherd's coat, šapık, and shoes were made to order by craftsmen in nearby villages; others manufactured the upright and horizontal looms. Now we buy ready-made clothing."

Gardening and Crafts

An indispensable feature within the courtyard of each house is a garden plot with vegetables and fruit trees (Fig. 15), tended almost exclusively by women, to provide the household with much-needed produce and liquid cash from sales at the weekly market. As mentioned earlier, women divide the time they spend in the summer months between milk processing and growing vegetables, wool processing, and quilting. For example, in a courtyard garden of one tenth of a hectare (a quarter acre), Keşban, mother of five grown children, harvests various vegetables—peppers, okra, tomatoes, eggplant, corn, green beans. Some weeks she has 40 kilograms of peppers to sell. Each week for two-and-a-half months she sells her produce at the regional market. This provides her with a substantial income and outdoor activity which friends and neighbors are acquired.

Not all gardening is a side activity, however. An old farmer and his wife who own a large garden, two hectares in size, derive all their income from the produce. The wife, daughter, and daughter-in-law work on the picking, marketing and occasional weaving, although the latter is done mainly by hired labor. Although the garden is a fairly serious investment in..."
Irrigation and labor costs, the return is as profitable as a mid-size farming enterprise. Recently, inspired by lucrative garden productions, a number of villagers set up greenhouses on an experimental basis, with the idea of year-round production.

Winter months are relatively slow for women who have prepared foods in summer for winter consumption. It is at this time that they take up craft production. In addition to making quits, women specialize in two types of crafts, making lace and knitting woolen stockings which have regional motifs. Villages are secretive about their inventory of motifs and reluctant to share them with neighboring villages. These crafts were originally produced for daughters’ trousseaus—mothers and grandparents started on them as soon as a baby girl was born. A local saying is, "girl in cradle, trousseau in the trunk." As the girl becomes old enough to thread a needle or hold knitting needles, she produces her own work under the guidance of her elder relatives. In recent years, the women have found outside markets for their handicrafts in shops in Polatlı and Ankara. Also serving as outlets for their sales are tourists to Gordian and members of the Gordian excavation team.

There is a revival of cotton fabric weaving on upright looms through an adult education program for young women that is sponsored by the district. Teachers from Polatlı hold classes in the villages and in the district during winter months, and the fabrics or finished pieces are sold in Polatlı. Until the 1940s there were a few households who specialized in weaving woolen trousers and shirts in Yasshöhöyük. (The cloth weaving tradition has been amply documented archaeologically in Phrygian Gordian.)

The initiation of a market-oriented economy, concomitant with the development of mechanized cereal farming in the Yasshöhöyük region in the late 1950s, had a strong impact on agricultural production, animal husbandry, and organization of labor. On a household level, wives began emerging as producers of specialized goods for the market. In contrast to their role in the past as unpaid field laborers, wives are developing entrepreneurial skills, organizing the hired labor and younger females, especially daughters-in-law. On another level, specialization of the traditional crafts persists as a way of life, and is transferred over generations through kin-linked female networks. However complex and varied are the socio-economic implications of mechanization in the region, Yasshöhöyük village provides an ethnographic model which outlines some of the salient features of the social context in which economic changes in ancient societies could have taken place, including at Gordian.

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