

Original paper

Traditional Wax and Honey Presses of Southeastern Europe

Tradicijne presy na vosk a med v južnovzhodne Evrope

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Abstract: Traditional wax and honey presses were used in Southeastern Europe, mainly in areas where beekeeping was widespread and consequent production of apiculture products was relatively high. Similar constructions have been documented in Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus and some have survived to this day, now in the hands of museums or private citizens. The oldest mention of a wax press in our area of interest concerns the island of Thassos in the Northern Aegean Sea and dates to the middle of the 19th century. The presses were of various types but most had one central rotary/screw press. However, this does not exclude constructions which had two similar presses, or others where the pressure was applied in other ways. Usually these presses were used only to extract one product, either the wax or the honey, but there have been cases documented where the same construction was used to extract the wax initially and then the honey. The use of these traditional wax and honey presses was gradually abandoned with the shift of the beekeepers in the area to the modern beehive and the accompanying tools that its use requires.

Abstrakcijny: Tradicijne presy na vosk a med byli uživane v južnovzhodne Evrope glávno v oblast'ah kde bylo rázširjeno pčelarstvo a tím padem i proizvodstvo pčelích produktov. Tyto konstrukcije suť znany z Bulgarie, Grecije a Kipru. Něktore přežili do dnes vo muzejah a privatnych sbornikach. Najstarši spominka o voskovich presah z tej oblasti jest z ostrova Thassos v severnem Agejskem morji a datuje se do posrědu 19. stolětje. Presi boli ráznych vzoru ale najčestěje se skladali iz srednego šruba. Druge konstrukcije tvorili tisk inými sposobami. Obyčajne sa pres užival po ekstragci le jedného produktu, ale suť dokumentovane i presy uživane pro vytežení vosku a potom medu. Upotrebjeny pro tute tradicijne presy na vosk a med se počinali poděti s přesunutím k moderným uljim i instrumentom.

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For many centuries, until the discovery of the modern hive and honey extractor, beekeepers used various methods to extract the honey and wax from the harvested honey-combs. One of the simplest and most widespread methods was putting the honey-combs into a basket to strain and applying pressure by hand.

These combined methods, first straining in a basket and then squeezing by hand were described in detail in the 1st century AD by the Latin writer Columella (*De Re Rustica*, IX, XV, 12-13)¹. On the extraction of wax he writes: "The remains of the honey-combs, when they have been squeezed, after being carefully washed in fresh water, are thrown into a brazen vessel; water is then added to them and they are melted over a fire. When this has been done, the wax is poured out and strained through straw or rushes. It is boiled over again a second time in the same manner and poured in such moulds as one has thought suitable, water having been first added. When the wax has hardened, it is easy to take it out, since the liquid which remains in the bottom does not allow it to stick to the moulds" (*De Re Rustica*, IX, XVI, 1)¹. Methods of extracting the wax, which are generally similar to the one described by Columella or that are based on the same principle, are used to this day by most beekeepers.

In areas where honey production was relatively high, the beekeepers themselves, or others catering for the needs of beekeepers, at some point started making tools and large or small presses, which facilitated the extraction of honey and wax.

The oldest mention of such a press in Southeastern Europe that we know of, dates to 1849 and regards the island of Thassos. That year, a bill of sale was drawn up, according to which the Monastery of Iviron on Mount Athos (Agion Oros) bought "a house which had a wax press"² in the village of Kastro. About twenty years later, in 1871, according to its records, another monastery in Mount Athos, that of Vatopedi, built a wax press at its metochion in the village of Voulgaro, in Thassos³. The cost of building this press was 280 grosi (one gros, or kurus, of that period is equivalent to about three present-day euros⁴). However, in the same year of its construction, the monastery had an income of 220 grosi from the beekeepers who paid a fee to extract their wax there. The following year (1872) the income of the monastery from the press reached 520 grosi.

It is worth mentioning that on the island of Thassos, as well as on the neighboring peninsula of Halkidiki, beekeeping was extremely widespread since the end of the 18th century and was practiced in an exclusively migratory way^{5,6,7}. The French consul in Thessaloniki Felix Beaujour, in a letter to his government on June 20th of 1797, mentioned that "Halkidiki produces 30-40 thousand oka of wax. The island of Thassos produces 25.000 ..."⁸. If we take into account that the ratio of wax to honey production in traditional beekeeping is approximately 1 to 10⁹, then honey production in Halkidiki and Thassos must have amounted to 350 and 250 thousand oka or approximately 450 and 320 tons respectively.

In Halkidiki they also used presses (Fig. 1). In fact, according to evidence from the 3rd decade of the 20th century, the owners of wax extraction workshops in the area, which possessed a wax press, charged the beekeepers 1 drachma per oka (= 1,2829 Kg) of extracted wax. That period the beekeepers sold one oka of honey for 11 drachmas and one oka of wax for 60 drachmas¹⁰. We are informed about the way these presses worked by the agriculturist Angellos Typaldos-Xydias, who visited Halkidiki and Thassos several times in the 1920s in order to promote the use of the modern hive to the local beekeepers. In his book *Migratory Beekeeping in Greece*¹⁰ he provides a drawing of a wax press (Fig. 2) and he explains in short how it worked. However, it is George I. Kourmoulis, who later became a professor of linguistics at the University of Athens, who documents the function of the wax press in this area and specifically on Thassos, in every possible detail¹¹.

Kourmoulis was on the island of Thassos in 1937 as a young researcher for the Athens Academy Centre for the Study of Modern Greek Dialects and Idioms, in order to gather linguistic material. But realizing the obvious importance of the information recounted by people, he compiled a very detailed ethnographic documentation of beekeeping on Thassos and of the wax presses or wax mills, as they were locally known. According to what he wrote in an extensive report, which is now kept in the records of the aforementioned centre¹¹, wax mills consisted of a manual wooden press and a small square tank. This tank had holes in its two opposite sides and the wooden piston/plunger which was squeezed by the press fitting exactly inside it. Straw was put in the press, which would collect some of the impurities in the honey combs so that it did not fall into the wooden container that was placed underneath. Combs were put into this tank after having strained them in a basket in a natural way, allowing the honey to run, and after heating them slightly and pressing them by hand, until they took the shape of a ball. With the use of hot water and the application of

pressure, the wax was melted and flowed through the holes of the tank along with the water and fell into the container underneath. From the container the wax was collected and put into moulds. Because there was always a small quantity of wax left in the container with the water, it was reheated and poured on folded sacks, from where the water and wax would strain, leaving impurities on the sacks. The wax would again be collected while the water, which had a diluted quantity of honey in it, was used to produce an alcoholic beverage called “moudouvina”. The solid remains of the whole process were collected and were a first rate fuel for burning.

No wax presses have been preserved to this day in Halkidiki, while in Thassos only one has survived but of smaller dimensions than those described by Kourmoulis. This one, whose bottom part is not wooden but metal^{12,13} is exhibited in the Ethnographic Museum of the village Theologos (Fig. 3). Similar wax presses were used on the island of Skyros, which along with Halkidiki and Thassos comprise the areas where the migratory basket hive of Northern Greece was used¹⁴. In fact, a large wooden wax press, in working condition, can be found there (Fig. 4). Although its construction date is not known,^{15,16} it was probably used in the 19th century.

Further North, in Bulgaria, two types of wax presses were also used in certain areas. One of them must have been similar to the ones described above. However, besides a general mention of the use of similar presses in this country¹⁷, no other evidence could be located. The second type has been documented in the village of Arda, in the mountain range of Rodopi, close to the Greek - Bulgarian borders. This press did not function with rotary compression but with wedges, which were positioned on the sides and hit with large logs that were suspended on the machine itself, thus pressing the plunger¹⁷ (Fig. 5).

In the mountainous region of Central Greece, there was a more unusual type of wax press in operation, which was also used for honey extraction (Fig. 6 & 7). It was called the “wooden donkey” and it was made up of two elongated wooden elements crossed over each other. The bottom piece was supported by two sawhorses, and at the point where they crossed it had a hollowed out, concave section (like a bowl). The honey combs were placed into that receptacle in sacs and the honey was extracted with the application of pressure. Then the remains were processed to extract the wax with the use of hot water^{18,19,20}.

Two wax presses have survived on the island of Rhodes, in the Southeastern Aegean Sea and are in the possession of private owners. One of them is noticeably larger and possibly older (Fig. 8)²¹. The other smaller one has an engraved marking on it with the date 1927, which is probably the date of its construction (Fig. 9)²². Judging from their pictures, their mode of operation seems to have been similar to that of wax presses in Northern Greece.

In the Ionian Sea, an unusual press with two rotary elements was used in the village of Varypatades, on the island of Corfu (Fig. 10)²³. The owner of this press, Spyros Skafidas, informed us that it was used by his ancestors at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. However, its construction may date to the 18th century. Its bottom section is made from a solid piece of olive tree and the interesting thing is that it was used exclusively for honey extraction.

It worked as follows: the honey combs were put into a sack and then between the two round woven discs of the press, that was locally referred to as “xemelistiri” (de-honeyer). By screwing the two rotary elements from above, the plunger pressed the sack and the honey flowed through the sack and the two round woven discs into a container which was placed underneath. The ancestors of Mr. Skafidas would then extract the honey by boiling the remains of the combs in a metal pot, in the same way described by Columella in the 1st century A.D.

In the village of Pano Lefkara, in Cyprus, part of a machine that used to be a press with a wooden screw has survived (Fig. 11 & 12)²⁴. It is composed of a wooden beam, fixed to the walls, in the corner of a roofed building. The beam had a carved receptor/screw hole within it, which has not been preserved. Underneath there is a stone-built base with a shallow basin and a central circular disc, on which the compression occurred. The honey flowed into the groove around the disc and into containers through the mouth of the basin.



Fig. 1: Wax press in operation. Chalkidiki, Greece (A. Typaldos - Xydias, 1927).

Obr. 1: Pres na vosk. Chalkidiki, Grecia. (A. Typaldos - Xydias, 1927).

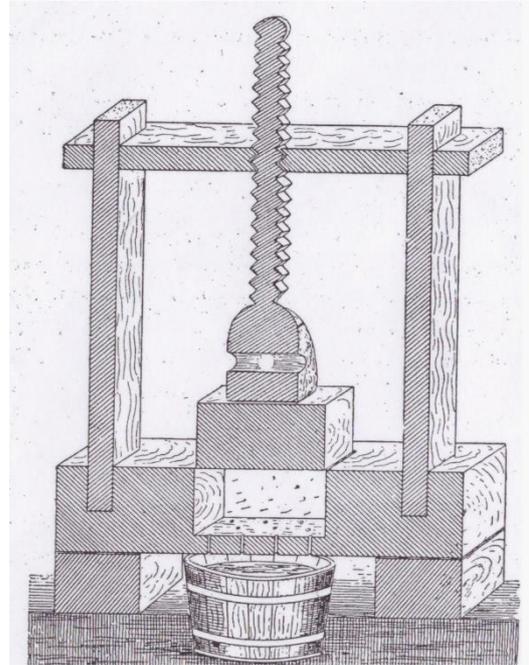


Fig. 2: Drawing of a wax press of Chalkidiki (A. Typaldos - Xydias, 1927).

Obr. 2: Črtanje presu na vosk iz Chalkidiki (A. Typaldos - Xydias, 1927).



Fig. 3: Wax press in the Ethnographic Museum of Theologos village on Thassos island, Greece.

Obr. 3: Pres na vosk iz Muzej Thelogos, ostrov Thassos, Grecia.



Fig. 4: Wax press on Skyros island, Greece (photo, Th. Bikos).

Obr. 4: Pres na vosk iz ostrova Skyros, Grecia (foto, Th. Bikos).

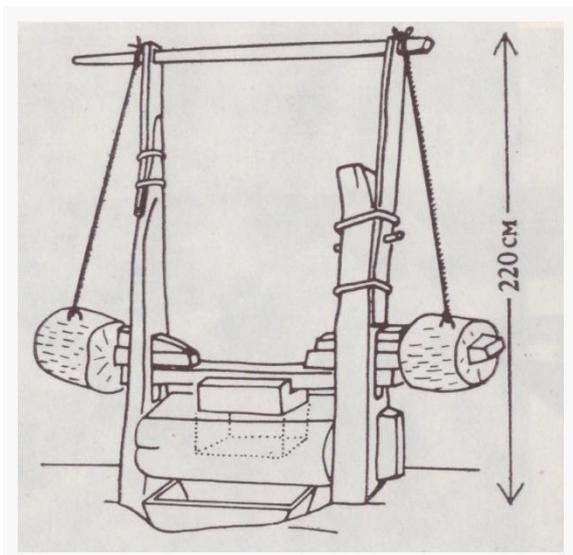


Fig. 5: Drawing of the wax press of Arda village, Bulgaria (Ch. Vakarelski, 1977).

Obr. 5: Črtance presu na vosk iz sela Arda, Bulgarija (Ch. Vakarelski, 1977).

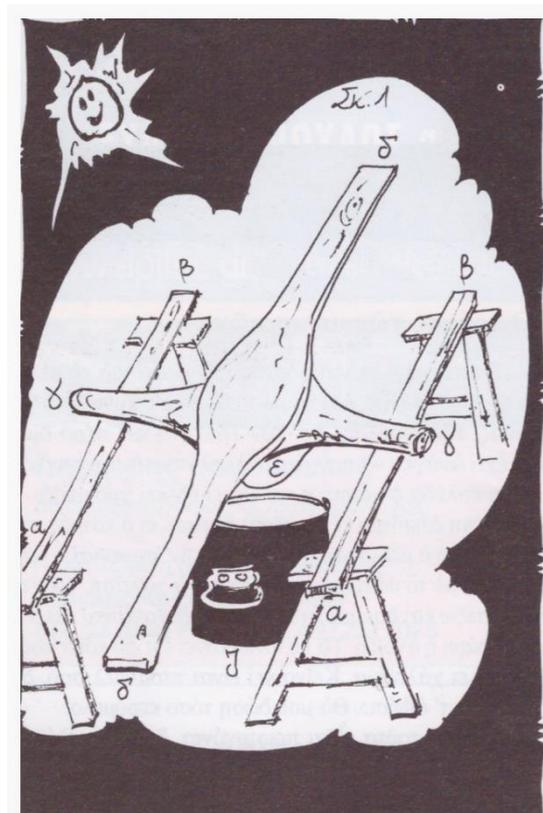


Fig. 6: "Wooden donkey" press that was used in Central Greece (drawing Th. Bikos).

Obr. 6: Pres „drevjany osel“ iz srednej Grecije (črtanje Th. Bikos).

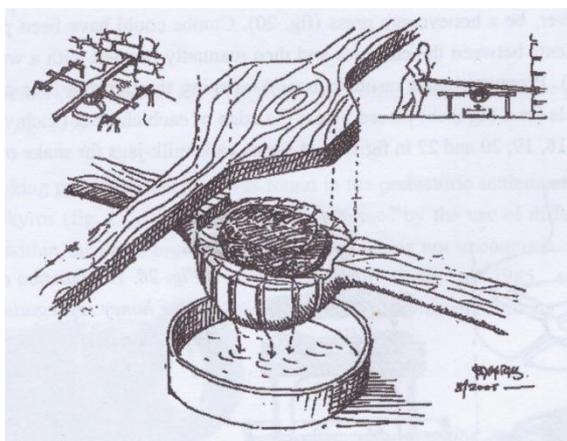


Fig. 7: Another drawing (from V. A. Harissis) of the honey and wax press of Central Greece.

Obr. 7: Ponovne črtanje presu na vosk a med srednej Grecije (V. A. Harissis).



Fig. 8: Wax press on Rhodes island, Greece (photo Th. Bikos).

Obr. 8: Pres na vosk iz ostrova Rodos, Grecia (foto Th. Bikos).



Fig. 9: Wax press of 1926. Rhodes island, Greece (photo K. Symiakos).

Obr. 9: Pres na vosk iz leta 1926. Ostrova Rodos, Grecia (foto K. Symiakos).



Fig. 11: Part of the honey press at Pano Lefkara village, Cyprus (E. Rizopoulou - Igoumenidou, 2000).

Obr. 11: Časť presu na med iz sela Pano Lefkara, Kipr (E. Rizopoulou - Igoumenidou, 2000).

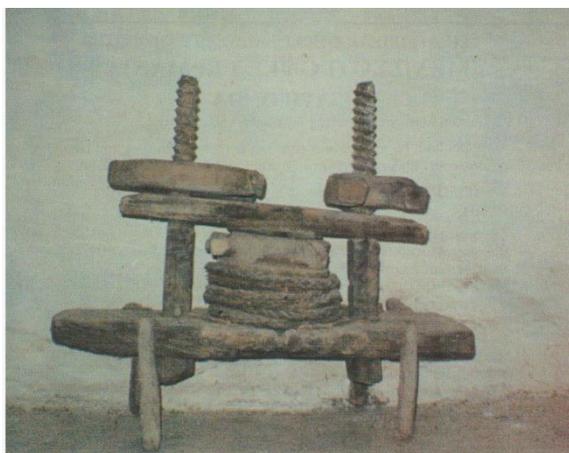


Fig. 10: Honey press at Varipatades village, Corfu, Greece (photo S. Skafidas).

Obr. 10: Pres na med vo selu Varipatades, Korfu, Grecia (foto S. Skafidas).



Fig. 12: The base of the honey press at Pano Lefkara, Cyprus (E. Rizopoulou - Igoumenidou, 2000).

Obr. 12: Zaklad presu na med vo Pano Lefkara, Kipr (E. Rizopoulou - Igoumenidou, 2000).

There is another stone-built basin of irregular shape, carved in limestone that seems to originate from a similar installation for the extraction of honey (Fig. 13) in the possession of a private owner in Nicosia, Cyprus²⁴.

A relatively recent proposition concerning an object from the Minoan era discovered in Crete is interesting and worth mentioning. According to this view, the object was a honeycomb press of the day. It is a circular object (height 10 cm, diameter 25 cm), divided into four parts by four channels and standing on three legs, found by Sir Arthur Evans in the so called “snake room” of a private house near the palace of Knossos, dating to the Middle Minoan IIIb – Late Minoan II (1600-1400 B.C.) period. According to Evans (Fig. 14), this object was a vessel for food offering to snakes (“snake table”)²⁵. But in the opinion of H. V. Harissis^{20,26}, it is actually a honeycomb press whose mode of operation is depicted in a drawing (Fig. 15).

Wax presses were also used in the rest of Europe, mainly in areas where beekeeping was widespread and consequent honey production was relatively high. Their use has been documented in Italy²⁷, Spain²⁸, France²⁹, Belgium³⁰, Holland³¹ and Germany^{32,33}. All the presses I am aware of are wooden and of the vertical type with a central rotary press, except for one in Belgium which has a horizontal press and is exhibited in the Apiculture Museum of Kalmthout²⁸. The oldest documented presses date to the 18th century. One is from France, depicted in an etching from 1751²⁹, and one from Germany dating back to 1770³³. Most of the others appear to have been used in the 19th century.

To summarize, the wax and honey presses used in Southeastern Europe were of various types and the oldest documentation of their use does not go beyond the middle of the 19th century. However, this does not exclude the possibility of some of them being used in the 18th century, especially in areas where beekeeping was particularly developed. The fact that we do not have accounts of the use of such presses in Europe before the middle of the 18th century, probably makes it clear that they first appeared on the continent around that time. The use of traditional wax and honey presses was gradually abandoned in the area under examination with the advent and spread of the modern beehive and the accompanying tools that its use dictates, such as honey extractors and modern wax extraction methods.



Fig. 13: Base of a honey press. Cyprus (E. Rizopoulou – Igoumenidou, 2000).

Obr. 13: Zaklad presu na med. Kipr (E. Rizopoulou – Igoumenidou, 2000).

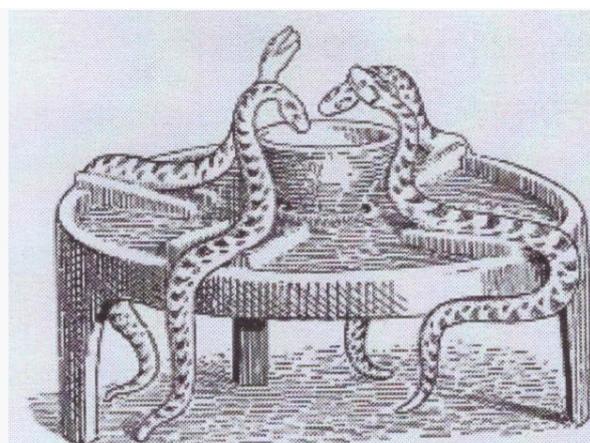


Fig. 14: Drawing of the Arthur Evans’s proposal for the function of the prehistoric table of Knossos as a vessel for food offering to snakes (A. Evans, 1935).

Obr. 14: Črtanje prvobytnje funkcije preistoričneho stolu iz Knossu ako krmítka dla gady podolog E. Evanse (1935).

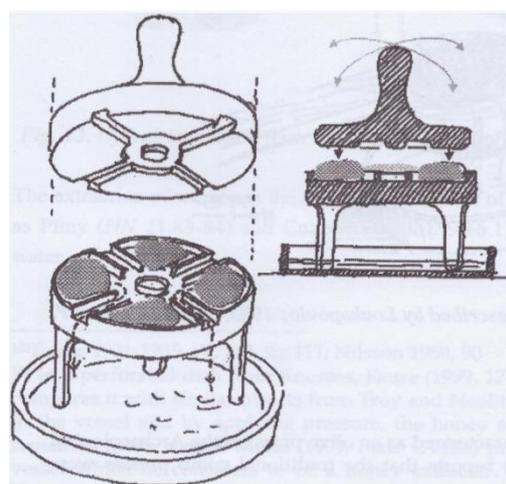


Fig. 15: The proposal of Haralambos V. Harissis for the use of Knossos’s table as a honey press (Drawing, V. A. Harissis).

Obr. 15: Funkcije stolu iz Knossu ako pres na med podolog V. A. Harissise.

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