

## RAGUSA: THE MYSTERY SPOT IN LACE-HISTORY

A QUESTION PUT TO STUDENTS AND CONNOISSEURS OF LACE

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**M**ANY years ago in Rome, when ladies of the noblesse and their friends were strenuously working for the revival of early Italian linen-work and lace of all kinds, Contessa Antonia Suardi of Bergamo gave me a little piece of pointed lace saying, "This is what in Italy is called 'Punto di Ragusa.'" This knotted stitch is found in all the needle-points reproduced in this study.

THE beautiful city of Ragusa on the Dalmatian coast, a miniature Venice, is credited with having made in past centuries an exquisite lace of which little is known except its fine quality—

"Les gens aussi fins que vous estes,  
Ne sont bons que comme vous faites  
Pour ruiner tous les états."

It is thus described in the celebrated anonymous satire—"La révolte des passemons," which originated in the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and was dedicated to Mademoiselle de la Crousse, cousin of Madame de Sévigné. The edicts of that time attempted to curb the wild extravagance of the French courtiers in the wearing of lace and gorgeous apparel. They are answered by all the laces in turn reciting their grievances. . . . But these fragile beauties are forced to submit to the inevitable . . . and when soldiers with firearms appear, they all run away.<sup>1</sup>

What was this lace of Ragusa known in France, and with such slight mention in Italy?—a question which I put to students and lovers of this beautiful art, if chance should have thrown such knowledge in their way?

French and English writers at most copy the above quotation in Mrs. Bury-Palliser's History from the poem written in 1661, but an interesting definition of certain curious laces of the Transition such as *punto in aria* which would usually be classified as Italian, is found in the Catalogue

<sup>1</sup>History of Lace. Mrs. Bury-Palliser, 1865-75. "La révolte des passemons." MDCLXI. Avec privilège du Roy. Bibliothèque Nationale. Z, 2382, A, L. This satire has been reprinted.

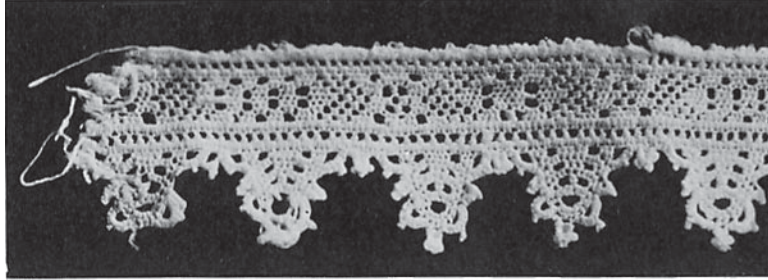


PLATE IA. PUNTO DI RAGUSA  
A POINTED NEEDLE-WORKED LACE. DALMATIAN, SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

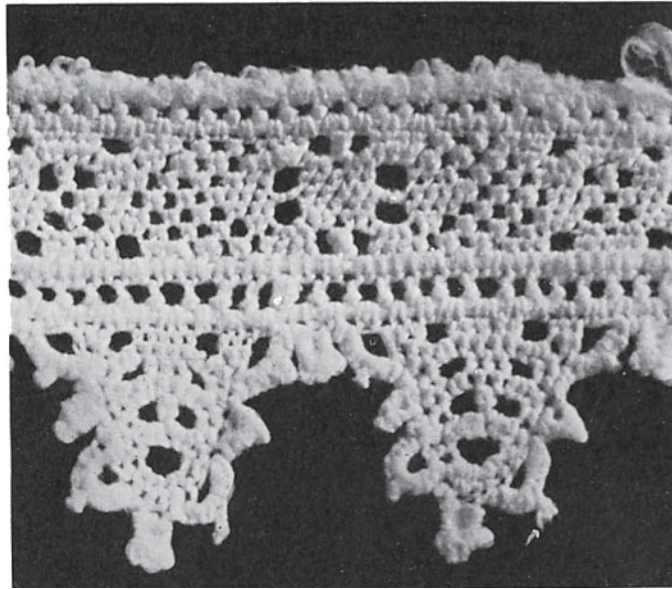


PLATE IB  
ENLARGEMENT OF THE PUNTO DI RAGUSA, ABOVE.

of the Contessa di Brazzà-Savorgnan who writes—"The guipures of Venice and of Ragusa are often spoken of as identical, but they are quite different in effect and execution, the *punto di Ragusa* having a distinctly Byzantine character."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Catalogue of Italian laces at the World's Fair, Chicago, 1893. By the Contessa di Brazzà-Savorgnan, *née* Cora Slocumb of New Orleans, one of the pioneers of the modern Renaissance of lace-making in Italy. The Castello di Brazzà being near Udine, must have afforded very special chances for studying these laces of Dalmatia.

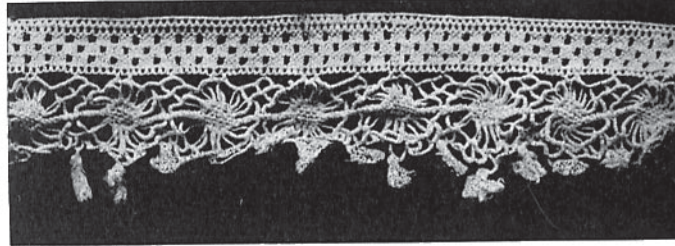


PLATE II. PUNTO AVORIO

THE BORDER IS COPIED FROM A GOLDEN "PASSAMANO," THE  
CENTRAL STITCHES WORKED IN PUNTO AVORIO—FROM RAGUSA  
—SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

This phrase throws a brilliant searchlight upon the mystery spot in lace-history—Ragusa—and one is surprised to find how many specimens of needlework could, and probably should be transferred from the more usual classification of the Mother-country, Italy, to the Dalmatian city—laces in our own collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and in a number of private collections.

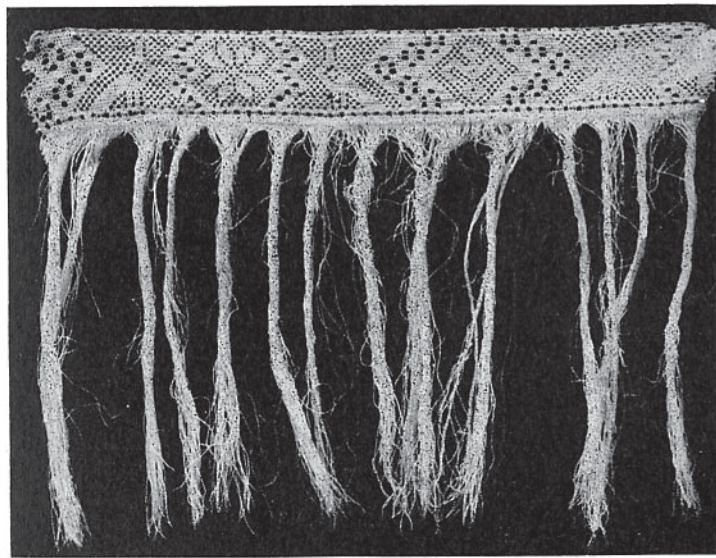


PLATE III

A FRINGED BAND OF PUNTO DI RAGUSA, SIXTEENTH CENTURY DESIGN.  
THE GROUNDING HAS THE DOUBLE STITCH EFFECT SO OFTEN USED  
IN DALMATIAN WORK.

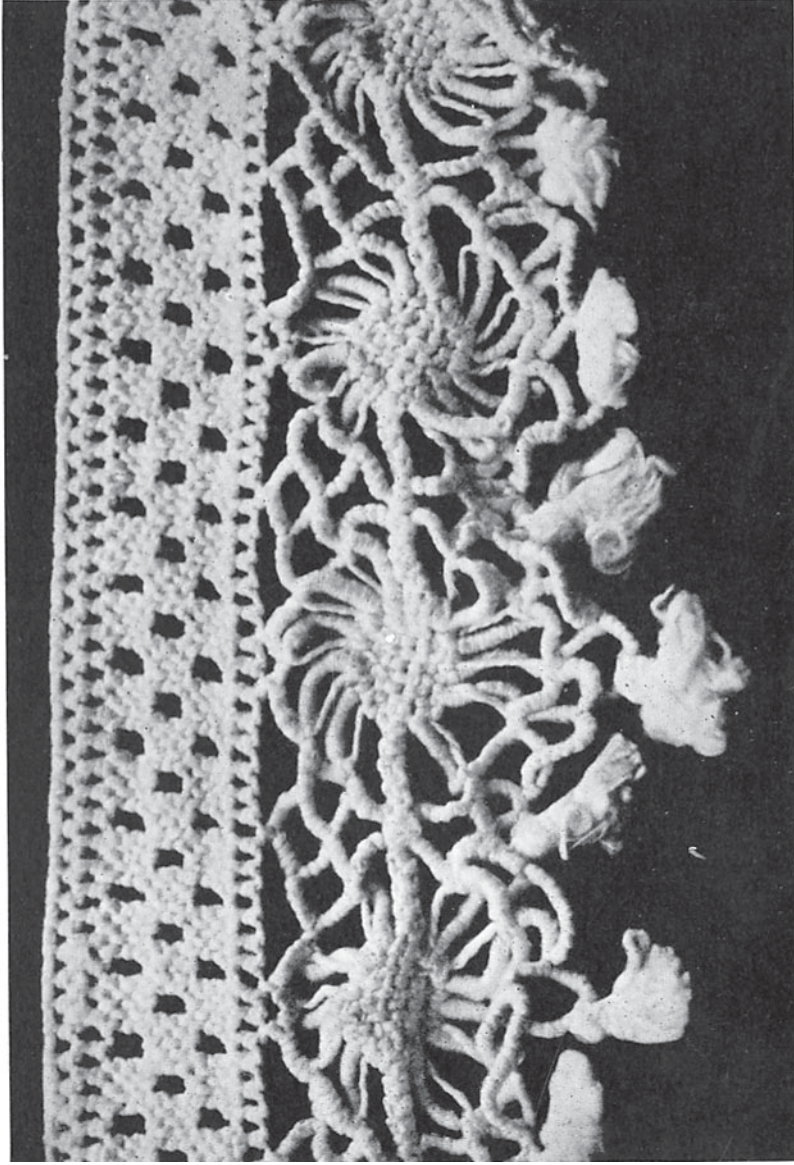


PLATE IV. ENLARGEMENT OF PLATE II  
BAND OF PUNTO AVORIO, THE BORDER COPIED FROM A GOLDEN PASSAMENT, THE CENTRE WORKED IN THE KNOTTED  
STITCH OF THE UPPER PART. SIXTEENTH CENTURY. BROUGHT FROM RAGUSA.

Technically, as described on page 14, the difference of execution to which the Contessa di Brazzà refers, consists chiefly in the use of the *punto avorio*, and its less closely worked form known as *punto di Ragusa* in Italy, differentiating it from the results attained by the use of the simple *punto a festone* (scalloping or buttonhole stitch) of Venice.

Ragusa, and probably the coast of Dalmatia extending toward Udine, seems to have followed the general progression of the periods dividing into four Groups of work, which we find in Italy, but with a very different interpretation of her own.

#### THE PLACE OF RAGUSA IN THE CLASSIFICATION OF LACE IN HISTORY

GROUP I. The Geometric period and early Renaissance. Designs emerging from embroidery. XVI century. In Ragusa—worked in the hard-knotted stitch of the *punto avorio* (ivory point), resembling cutwork in the early years of the century, and later the lighter style of *reticello*.

GROUP II. The Transitional style of *punto in aria*—point in the air—(the term is used untranslated), designs passing on from the rigid lines of the Geometric period. 1600 to 1650. In Ragusa—Byzantine designs worked with a combination of *punto avorio* and its lighter form, *punto di Ragusa*.

GROUP III. Laces, the various parts of the design when not self-supporting, united by bars (*con barrette—brides à picots*). In Ragusa—a rare specimen shows motifs and scrolls forming a lace of great delicacy, worked in the *punto di Ragusa*, with an openwork tracery of design. 1650–1700.

GROUP IV. Laces—the designs supported by a grounding of various meshes, which increased in extent as the designs diminished in importance.

In Ragusa—the characteristic laces of that country do not appear to have continued beyond the early years of the XVIII century, corresponding with the very fine but rich designs of slight relief, known in their respective countries as—early Burano (*punto di Venezia col fondo*)—*Point d'Alençon* Louis XIV—and old needle-point Brussels. In Ragusa—there is always the delicate tracery of slipped stitches, and a diminished use of *punto di Ragusa*.

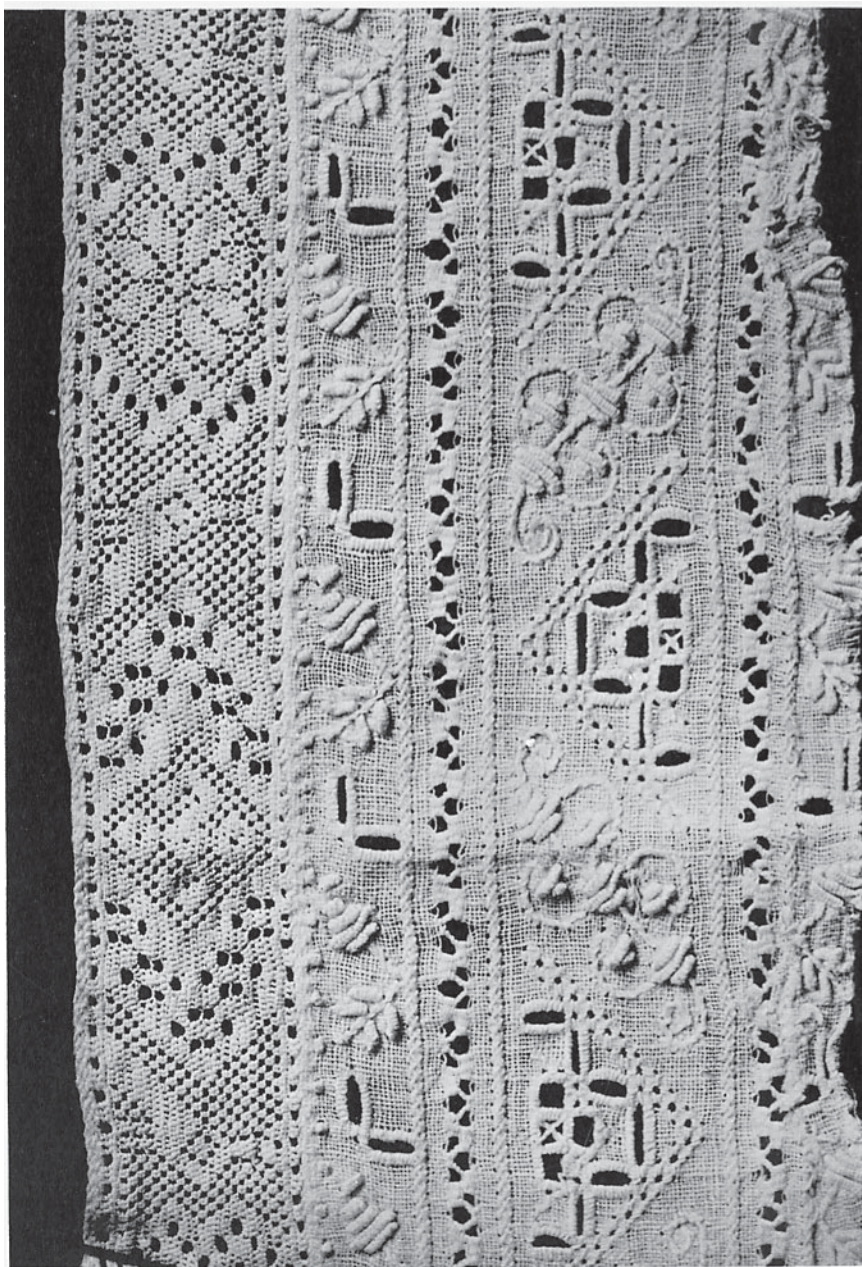


PLATE V

EARLY DESIGN OF DRAWN-CUTWORK, WITH A RELIEF OF EMBROIDERY IN PUNTO RICCIO AND BORDER OF PUNTO DI RAGUSA, WITH THE CHARACTERISTIC TRACERY, OPEN SPACES, AND GROUNDING OF DOUBLE STITCHES. DALMATIAN, SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

## GROUP I

## THE GEOMETRIC PERIOD AND EARLY RENAISSANCE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Italy and the Grecian Islands, under the dominion of Venice, produced in that marvellous "*cinque cento*," the most amazing amount of beautiful needlework both in white and color. Of geometric design in the early decades, they later passed on to the freer lines of the Renaissance.

The Byzantine designs in Ragusa, noted by the Contessa di Brazzá, varied as they passed from one period to another, deviating in Group III, to classical subjects.

The hard-knotted stitch called *punto avorio*, "ivory point," is the basis of these laces. In the early XVI century serried stitches, each row taking firm hold between each stitch of the preceeding row, seem to represent coarse linen, showing at times a slight tracery of geometric design caused by passing stitches, the succeeding row working upon the length of thread between, as many stitches as were passed over. The pattern of little square holes (Pl. II, *brought from Ragusa*) suggests that it was inspired by a similar effect in an early Byzantine mosaic.

The *punto di Ragusa* (Pl. I) is the same knotted stitch, but worked more lightly, the knots further apart, or alternating in succeeding rows, and with much tracery in the design other than geometric. A distinctive grounding was evolved in the later laces, by placing stitches two and two apart, the following rows of two worked upon the length of thread between. The laces of Alençon produced many varied effects with the passing of one or more stitches, in the XVIII century.

According to Madame de Dillmont, the *punto avorio* is worked as follows<sup>1</sup>—Draw a thread through a selvage or braid—a second stitch to the right—instead of putting the needle through the loop thus formed, as for a tailor's buttonhole—carry the thread to the left—put the needle (above the thread) through the loop from back to front—and draw tight the thread. The *punto avorio* can be worked to and fro.

Alternate light and shade in leaves and other forms, the lighter effect caused by alternating stitches in each row of knots of the *punto avorio*—

<sup>1</sup>Encyclopédie des ouvrages de dames. Thérèse de Dillmont. p. 548 in the small edition. She calls the stitch "point noué," or knotted point, and says that it was beautifully worked in Persia and in Asia Minor.

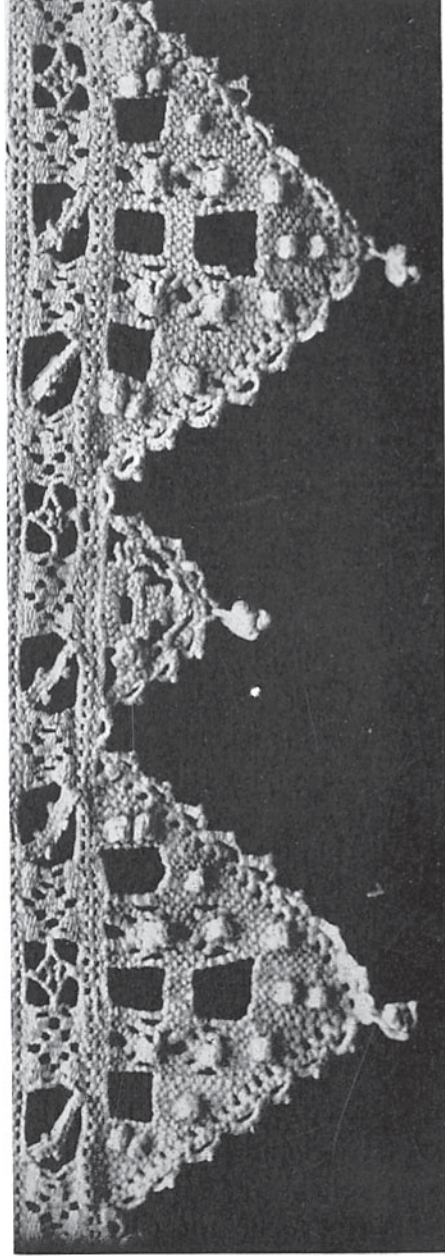


PLATE VI

DRAWN WORK AND PUNTO AVORIO. COPY MADE IN VALLE VOGNA OF SIXTEENTH CENTURY WORK, PROBABLY FROM DALMATIA.



the placing of the flat rosaces—the varying number of petals, five, six, ten, twelve or sixteen, never the classical eight-pointed star of Venice—are details which differentiate the work of Ragusa from the needle-points of the Mother-country, and bind together the whole group of laces in the accompanying illustrations.

“This is the true *punto avorio*, *punto greco*, *punto saraceno*, *puncetto*, so-named throughout Italy,” writes Contessa Suardi of the little pointed lace, *punto di Ragusa*, Plate I. She has made a special study of this stitch, which grows in interest as one finds its varied forms, and the connection with the Orient indicated by several of the names.

At Parre near Bergamo, the Contessa found one old woman who still could work this knot, and persuaded her to teach it to five little girls, thus saving it in this place as the teacher died within a month after giving her knowledge to another generation. At Parre, the XVI century name still survives which we find in the Pattern Book of Isabetta Catanea Parasole, 1596 and 1616—“*punto a mezza mandolina*,” or stitch of half an almond shape, where there are characteristic designs of *punto avorio* of the severely geometric style. It was probably of extended use in the XVI century, and on account of its solidity, much used for pointed borders of the cut- and drawnwork of the day. A little pointed collar of a child’s dress is found in the first volume of Signora Ricci’s folios: “*Antiche Trine Italiane*.” Many pointed borders and insertions have found their way into the collections of my family, and a deep collar and cuffs of the *reticello* of the late XVI century, worked in the serried type of the *punto avorio*, are owned by Mrs. Robert W. de Forest, which certainly comes from a land where the women were skilled in this stitch. The lighter designs in this style immediately preceded the very interesting needle-points of Group II, the *punto in aria*.

Among the places where *punto avorio* has been found can be mentioned Sicily, Bologna, Parre, and in the high Swiss mountains there is a curious style of detached motifs, the points finished with a little tassel and placed between strips of linen. A table-cloth in my own collection is surrounded by little points in the same stitch. The Metropolitan Museum owns a linen cover which is finished around the edge with a charming and unusual little one-line point of *punto avorio*, completing a remarkable specimen of cutwork and *punto in aria*, the central spaces showing a

Greek with his long moustachios, and voluminous white skirts, which certainly tell that it is a needlework from the Grecian Islands in close proximity to Dalmatia.

On the southern slopes of Monte Rosa, Valle Vogna and Val Sesia, the *punto avorio* in its most solid style, has never ceased to be worked for the chemises and kerchiefs of the peasant women.

A kind-hearted Englishwoman some years ago created a little industry for these poor women, who while away the long winter days when they are shut in by snow and avalanche, making this lace from the XVI century designs.<sup>1</sup> They are very clever in copying from photographs. Some of the *puncetto* as they call it—little point—is of the early type like solid linen, with a tracery of geometric design where stitches are passed over as if copied from a piece of cutwork; they have been known to work twenty-four hours at a stretch in a press of orders. The later patterns are as elsewhere, lighter “*reticello* translated into dialect”,<sup>2</sup> with often details of the more elaborate work of the lowlands lost in the hard life of the upper Alps. But in such quiet spots in Italy the technique of early days has been saved, and as Signorina Carolina Amari has said “they talk of the Pattern Books as if they were living facts.”

It was in one of these patterns that I first found a connection with Ragusa—a simple lace and design, a square on end alternating with a St. Andrew’s, or diagonal cross, the detail lost. Within a fortnight, a bit of embroidery was brought me straight from Ragusa, made for a peasant’s cuff, which had the finials and other lines needed for the completion of the design. Another Valle Vogna pattern can be found in the lovely blue and green tiles of a fountain in Tangier—such is the migration of design.

Pl. II shows in the straight band a very archaic conception of what the needle can accomplish; but the border is very curious with its centre of ivory point surrounded by loops, it would seem, copied from a golden “*passamano*” of about that date, to be seen in our own Museum.

The *oya*, or needle-made net of Turkey and Armenia—*bibille* the modern Greek term—leaves a short length of thread between the knots.

<sup>1</sup>Valle Vogna and its Lace-industry. By Mrs. E. M. Lynch.

<sup>2</sup>Antiche trine italiane. Signora Eliza Ricci. 2 Vols. Rome-Bergamo, 1908.



PLATE VII

CHALICE VEIL OF PUNTO IN ARIA—BYZANTINE DESIGN, FROM RAGUSA IN DALMATIA  
FIRST HALF OF SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

It is close of kin to the *punto avorio*, but worked in color for the little flowered border on the edge of the *yażma*, or square of printed cotton stuff which the ladies of those countries wore on the head at home, the four corners lifted and held in place with pins, the flowered garland falling on the hair. The serving classes do not lift the four corners, but leave them pendant.

The *oya* is also found in Tunis at the present time, when the native women can be induced to work it.

A fine, narrow lace was made in England for the insertions of little



PLATE VIII

PUNTO IN ARIA—RAGUSA—BYZANTINE DESIGN, ABOUT 1600-1650. NOTICE THE SIX PETALED ROSES, AND THE TEN PETALS ABOVE INSTEAD OF THE CLASSICAL EIGHT POINTED STAR IN VENETIAN WORK.

babies' caps, called Hollie (or Holy) Point, which resembles Pl. I, *punto di Ragusa*, although probably worked in the tailor's buttonhole stitch.

#### GROUP II

*Punto in aria*, the transition came when the increasing skill in needle-point stitches progressed from the rigid geometric lines of the preceding period with the supporting threads of linen, and filled this framework with figures, flowers and tendrils—one of the most varied and interesting spots in lace-history.

While *punto in aria* is the generic name for all the Venice Points, and so-used by many writers, in one of the most important of the Italian Pattern Books, I. C. Parasole, 1596–1616, we find many special designs of the Transition so designated, contrasting with the geometric construction of the reticello on other pages. "Worked with the pattern laid before you," said an old Roman lace-maker in speaking of these transitional needle-points, and with the outward fling of the hand characteristic of that period.

Ragusa undoubtedly produced the superb chalice-veil of Byzantine design (Pl. VII) in the first half of the seventeenth century with a Bishop apparently bearing a model of a Cathedral. In the solid parts the stitches are worked over a thread, contrasting with the lighter effects of knots in *punto avorio*, this light and shade in whole or half leaves, is continually used in Dalmatian work. Twelve-pointed rosaces are in each corner, and a low relief outlines the face and figure of the Saint, with his tower and crozier.

The archaic beasts, birds and flowers of this quaint little specimen, Pl. VIII, has undoubted marks of Ragusan work—the low relief—the contrasting light and shade, in which always the light is of *punto avorio*. Also the flowers of the central part are six-leaved, with ten-leaved rosaces above. The importance of these details increases as we find them in many needleworks of this time and country.

In Signora Ricci's first volume—*Punto in aria*, Plates IX, X, XX, XXI there are late Byzantine designs with the contrasting light and shade, and the knot of the *punto avorio* in alternate rows and stitches. A very extensive use of this particular effect is found in the very beautiful needlework of Pl. XXIV, influenced it would seem by a Persian silk or rug.

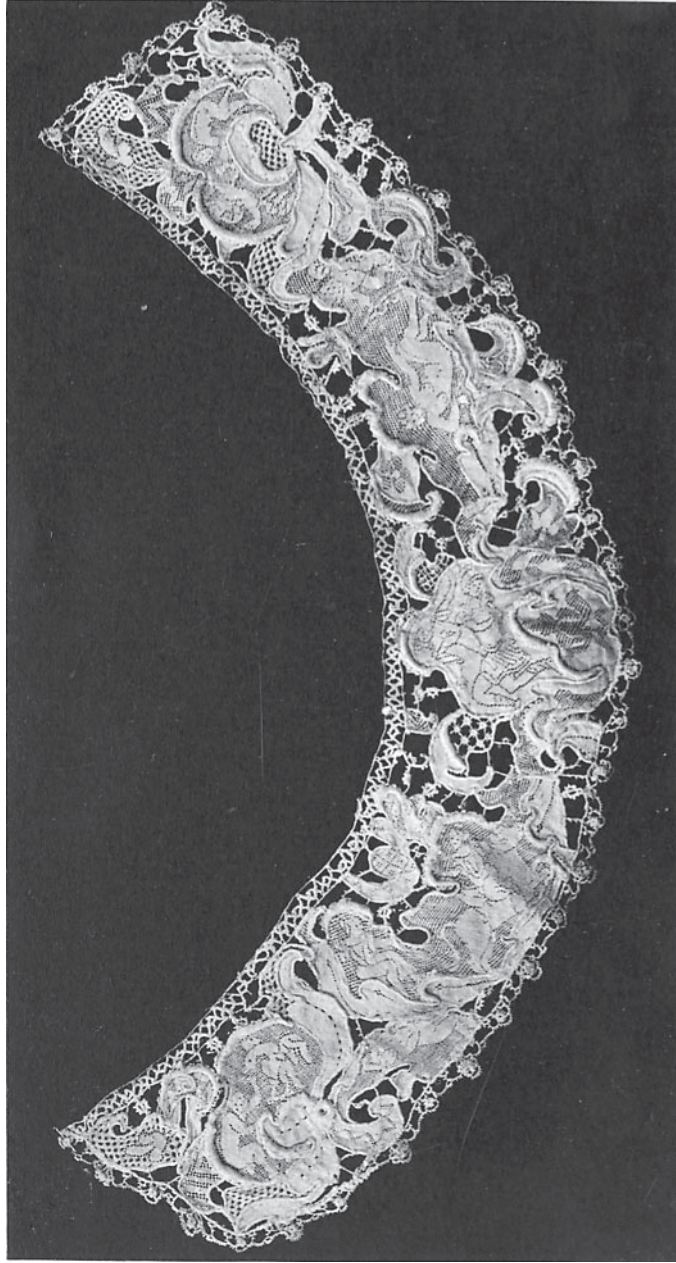


PLATE IX

CLASSICAL SUBJECTS OF LEDA AND THE SWAN, EUROPA AND THE BULL, ETC. MOTIFS AND SCROLLS CONNECTING. THE  
EDGE BARS AND HIGH RELIEF ARE LATER ADDITIONS, PROBABLY FRENCH. THE GROUNDING FOR THE FIGURES IS WORKED  
IN PUNTO DI RAGUSA. DALMATIAN WORK, MIDDLE OF SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

There would be little doubt of their Ragusan origin, even seen only in reproduction.

And how many more may be discovered, when these definite technicalities are fully recognized as belonging to Ragusa?

Were these needlepoints known in France and at the Hôtel de Rambouillet in the middle of the seventeenth century?

### GROUP III

Laces, the different parts united by bars with picots, knots (*con barrette—dentelles à fond de brides*) when they are not self-supporting. About 1650–1690.

What was the reaction of Ragusa to the superb laces of Venice in the latter half of the seventeenth century? Laces of large design and high relief known in Italy as the *punto di Spagna*, and the delicate flowers, leaves, and tendrils of the *punto alla rosa*?

Can we suppose that this most curious lace, Pl. IX, with its classic subjects of Leda and the Swan, Europa and the Bull (showing the proximity of Greece), was Ragusa's interpretation of the self-supporting motifs and scrolls of this climax in the art of lace? It is *worked in the punto di Ragusa*, distinctly seen in an enlarged photograph taken at the Museum.

The specimen as it came to the Museum from the Blackburne collection, had been barbarously mutilated and drawn into the small rounded collar of the early XIX century. The border and connecting brides are later additions, probably French, and also the high relief in certain parts of the design.

What was the primitive state of this most rare lace? Has it fellows and where are they? or was it a single stroke of genius? A little figure forming the central part of a flower with pointed leaves which could have been worked by the same hand as Leda and Europa, is in the collection of the Contessa Suardi, otherwise nothing in this style has come in my way. Could it be the lace from Ragusa known in France for its fine quality—"fait pour ruiner tous les états," even among the ruinously beautiful needleworks of that country?

This little bit of *punto di Ragusa* is indeed the mystery-spot connected by name with the beautiful city of Dalmatia.



PLATE XI

A GROUNDED LACE—BYZANTINE DESIGN. PROBABLY FROM RAGUSA. EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.



## GROUP IV

Grounded lace—*Merletto col fondo*—*Dentelle à fond de réseau*. After 1700.

Pl. X. This beautiful specimen was given to The Metropolitan Museum of Art many years ago, by Mr. Amos Eno, through Miss Catherine A. Newbold, as a very rare lace from the vicinity of Udine. The character of the design, the seven-pointed rosaces, tell of Dalmatian technique, with the more lightly worked grounding of the Burano laces of about 1700. The flat scallops belong to an earlier date, but possibly were carried on for a few decades in this country, or the grounding used at an earlier period, even considered an evolution from the linen-work as in Pls. III and V.

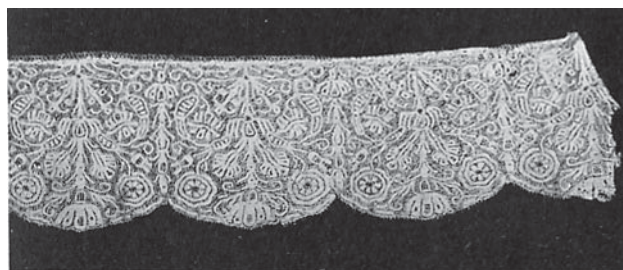


PLATE X

AN EARLY GROUNDED LACE—FLAT SCALLOPS  
SAID TO HAVE COME FROM UDINE  
FIRST HALF OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

In classifying these needle-points, the dates are established according to the general scheme as evolved from books, work, and paintings, but the individuality of the lace-maker and the influence of her environment must be remembered, especially in the classes of needlework, this little instrument being a factor for the free translation of inspiration, far more than the bobbins, necessarily held down to the pattern pinned to a cushion.

GROUP IV. Pl. XI. The very interesting border of the Madonna and Child was brilliantly defined by Monsieur van Overloop, Conservateur of the Musée Cinquantenaire in Brussels, as having been "worked in some shut-in place like a convent, under the influence of a Byzantine picture." Every detail tells of Ragusan origin—the design—the tracery of the

figures within the ovals—the five-leaved rosaces and archaic drawing, and with a certain use of the Burano grounding, the double-stitch effect of the *punto di Ragusa* is between many petals and, also where the broad shallow points have been cut to form a straight band.

The lace would seem to belong to the short transition about 1700, from the Venetian and French laces of high relief, to the varied styles of grounded laces of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For a few years, exquisitely fine, flat laces, with no relief, the rich designs supported by the fine *réseau* of Burano, were made in Italy. France and Belgium, distinguished by the design as early Burano or *punto di Venezia col fondo*—*Point d'Alençon* Louis XIV—and old needle-point Brussels. They are rare. It is to this short transition that I would ascribe this most curious work from Ragusa, which closes for the moment the series of Dalmatian needle-points.

#### THE QUESTION

What was the lace of Ragusa? Was it one? or were they many? “Byzantine design,” writes the Contessa di Brazzà-Savorgnan, and many respond to this style. “A different technique from Venice,” she also says, to which the little pointed lace given to me by Contessa Suardi replies—“This is what in Italy is called *punto di Ragusa*.”

In all of these curious needle-points which, through decades, have one by one been laid away in the coffers of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, we find often the Byzantine design, and always the knotted stitch, so different from the *punto a festone* of the renowned City of the Lagoons. With great variety, there is a unity in the sequence of laces illustrated in this article.

I would express warm thanks to both of my Italian friends for their guiding hands which led me to this quaint and beautiful corner of lace-history.

My grateful thanks also to Miss Frances Morris, Associate Curator of Textiles in the Museum, for many helpful indications of recent gifts, and for her choice of photographs and enlargements, so generously sent me by Mr. Kent, Secretary for the Museum, without which my study might never have seen the light.

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