1. Origins and historical notes about Bulgarian Needlepoint Lace “Kene” as a variety of the Mediterranean knotted lace

Lace making is one of the oldest crafts in human history. It is impossible to ascertain in which region of our planet it exactly started. The first handmade laces were simple nets. In the old times nets were used for fishing and to transport big stones used in the construction of buildings. It was the knotting of these rough nets that originated the idea of making finer, more artistic works, thus hand made lace was born. Observing the way in which the basic knot of the Bulgarian lace is executed, we can assume that it originated from the making of fishing nets. We could discuss endlessly, trying to pinpoint the exact geographical region where the first Bulgarian needlecraft was made. The information from the available and known literary sources is contradictory.

Given the similarity in the technical execution of lace in all Eastern regions, we could nevertheless assume that it started in China, and that it spread from there. The real origin is lost in bygone ages. We find the first traces of this kind of lace already in the 7th century BC in Babylon. From there it spread to India, China, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Greece and Rome. On the way back from Asia to Europe this lace making technique was heavily influenced by Chinese, and later by Byzantine embroidery. In Byzantium we find the earliest example of this needlecraft in Church garments. Later it appears in traditional clothing and household items.

Used as a decorative element, the Armenian/Bulgarian lace makes its appearance in the Eastern part of the then divided Roman Empire, starting in the 13th and 14th centuries AD.

At this point in time the Northern border of the Byzantine Empire touched the Bulgarian Realm; this realm, in turn, was founded about seven hundred years before by a small population of Asian origin, the Proto Bulgars. We can assume that the old art of producing fine needle lace, which in Armenia arose to Art Work, was also known by the Proto Bulgar population. When we observe the clothing style of both the Bulgarian and the Armenian aristocracy in the early middle age, we see a striking similarity.

Nowadays many of the people of Eastern Mediterranean origin (such as the Armenians, the Turks, the Greeks, the Bulgarians, the Palestinians and the Egyptians) each ascribe to their own tradition the invention of the oldest needlecraft technique. This explains the different names by which this needle lace is known: Bebilla for the Greeks; Oya for the Turks; Kene, but also Shita Dantela, Pupki, or Zarafluk for the Bulgars. Furthermore, Palestinian lace, Nazarene lace and Smyrna lace.

In Australia and the USA the technique was introduced by the many refugees, or immigrants, from Armenia and Turkey and is therefore known as Mediterranean knotted lace. But in the specialized literature this fine handmade art work, executed with a simple needle, is called Armenian Needlepoint lace.

In Europe the production of needlepoint lace started during the 15th century in Italy, where the Punto in Aria and Punto Avorio (Puncetto Valsesiano, Puncetto) are well known. The Puncetto and the Bulgarian needlepoint are made using the same basic knot, the main difference being that the Puncetto lace motives are practically only geometrical shapes. The Punto in Aria and the Punto Avorio could be defined as an intermediary passage between the original Asian shapes and the latter European motifs.

Surprisingly some identical needle lace work can be found both in the traditional dress of women from the region of Bern (Switzerland) and the Samokov, Kjustendil, Sofia, etc. regions in Bulgaria. Both the laces were made employing the same needlepoint lace technique. No patterns were used to produce these laces and they were made practically at the same point in time, namely the first half of the 19th century. The amazing point is that there is no known connection between the laces, one did not influence the other (Fig. 1-4). Is this a mere coincidence...?
1. Characteristics of Bulgarian Needlepoint Lace “Kene”

The traditional Bulgarian needlepoint lace (Shita Dantela in Bulgarian, which literally translated means Sewn Lace) is made by series of very tiny knots, employing a normal needle and fine cotton or silk threads. The basic stitch is a single or multiple looped knot. (Fig. 5 & 6).
In this way we obtain a texture; more space between stitches and less wrapping of the thread around the needle make for an open texture. The finer the thread, the lighter and more delicate the work will appear.

In Bulgaria's central regions of Koprivstica and Plovdiv horsehair are used to make the lace. The horsehair makes the lace stand upright and it is used to decorate the head scarfs of the traditional women dresses of these regions. This kind of Bulgarian lace is called Zarafluk.

Bulgarian needlepoint lace is made up by single rows flowing horizontally (Fig. 7 and 8), or vertically (Fig. 9), or in circles (Fig. 10).

Each row can contain many motifs. In the different regions of Bulgaria we find a wealth of styles, shapes and compositions; some laces are very simple, created using the most well known knot sequences, in many variations; whereas other laces are complicated compositions of rosettes, geometrical shapes, stylized flower, animal and even human figures; these motifs are obtained by differently shaped peaks and rows, and by circular ones, triangular ones, square ones.

It is interesting to note that all this wealth of motifs and peaks are achieved employing the one single basic knot. Patience, precision of visual aesthetic judgment, dexterity of the hands and the artistic sense of Bulgarian women are put to the test. In older times, in certain Bulgarian regions, namely in Koprivstica, young men based their
choice of a bride depending upon the beauty and intricacy of the lace the girls used to make to adorn their festive and common traditional costumes.

![Image of handkerchief with Bulgarian needlepoint lace]

**Fig. 11 Some examples of the variety of Bulgarian needlepoint lace, made by Mariana Brankina, are illustrated here in the hemming of some handkerchiefs**

### 2. The aim of this booklet

The aim of this booklet is to pass on the knowledge of how to make of the basic knot using the **simple knotted stitch**, and variations; so that you will be able to create on your own basic designs, which could be used for decorating clothing. Depending upon you own progress, and interest, you will also be able to create rosettes; these can be used as a further decorative element.

The teaching of the two and multiple knot stitch, as well as the creation of complicated designs (as the ones in figure 11) will be the theme of a further booklet.

Bulgarian lace is created working without a pattern, meaning: in the air, so you will need enough practice of the hands movements and precise visual gauging in the execution of the basic knotted stitch, in order to create harmony in the various elements you want to insert in the lace.

### 3. Materials

a) One normal sewing needle size 10 (about 1.2 inches long)

b) Small scissors

c) Fabric:
   - to practice and learn: some Aida fabric in cotton or linen;
   - to use the lace: you can apply the lace on any kind of fabric

d) Thread:
   - for beginners: mercerized crochet cotton (DMC, Anchor, etc.) , size from 70 onwards.
   - for experts: mercerized crochet cotton or natural silk (DMC, Anchor, etc.), size from 80 onwards, and embroidery tread type mouline

### 4. Let’s begin

Take a length of thread, 10 to 48 inches long, and pass it trough the needle. If you don't have any experience choose a short thread, this is to avoid the formation of unwanted knots, created by the twisting of the thread during work.; with some experience you will be able to avoid the nuisance of these twists.
The advantage of a longer thread is that it creates fewer interruptions in the peak rows; it also reduces execution time, and this can be very important in the application of this complicated lace technique. Beside: the less joins the lace has, the stronger, more beautiful, finer and regular the lace will be.

The knot stitch can be made from left to right, or from right to left, it depends upon what hand you use to write and which kind of motif you are working on.

5.1 Simple knotted stitch from left to right

**Step 1:** Pass the needle through the cloth, very near the edge of the hem, from from front to back. The thread coming out from the cloth now goes over the needle, from left to right. (Fig.12)

![Fig. 12 Step 1](image)

**Step 2:** The thread coming from the needle's eye is now passed under the needle, from right to left, as in Fig. 13

![Fig. 13 Step 2](image)
**Step 3**: Pull the needle through the loops you just formed (Fig. 14)

![Fig. 14 Step 3](image)

The rows of peaks and stitches from left to right are built as in Fig. 15.

![Fig. 15 rows from left to right](image)

**5.2 Simple knotted stitch from right to left**

This is used by left-handed people or in the construction of single motifs. The stitch is worked in mirror order of the previous one. (Fig. 16).

![Fig. 16 Simple knotted stitch executed from right to left](image)

*Important rule*: The thread coming from the previous knot always goes above the needle, the thread coming from the needle’s eye always goes under the needle.
After some (or a lot of) practice you will no longer have to think which thread goes where. The lace maker develops a feeling for the correct thread position and the hand starts to do the movements automatically.

Careful attention is also needed in making sure that all the peaks are of the same length and that the rows always are of the same height; here too, exercises and experience will guide you.

### 5.3 When the thread ends

Look at the following drawings, they explain the correct sequence for adding new thread.

![Fig. 17 New thread](image)

### 5.4 Adding or removing peaks

When you work adding a lace decoration to the hems of a cloth with symmetric edges, it is of the first importance that every side has the same number of stitches.

Working with a cloth where you can count the threads you will not have any problem.

A problem could arise when you have to work on a different kind of fabric or with an item with non symmetric edges (lets say a rectangular table cloth or two parallel decorations on a dress). Even an experienced lace maker, when working on asymmetrical edges, has to be very careful to achieve the exact same amount of stitches all over.

In order to achieve a perfect symmetry in your work, you will have to add, or remove, single stitches/peaks.

**Adding a peak:** here you work two, not just one, knots in one peak from the previous row (Fig. 18)

![Fig. 18 Inserting a peak](image)

**Removing a peak**

You can remove a peak in two ways : you can jump over one of the peaks in the previous row (Fig. 19a), or you can start to make a peak in the normal position, then jump over the two next going to the third peak from there, and close with the normal knot (Fig. 19b).

![Fig. 19a removing a peak, jump one](image)  ![Fig. 19b removing a peak, jump two](image)
6. Different peak rows

6.1 Basic peaks

Fig. 20 Little holes

Fig. 21 Bridges

Step 1

Step 2

Step 3

Ears

Fig. 22 Simple ear

Fig. 23 Double and triple ear

6.2 Reinforced peaks

By a series of knots, worked very closely together, the peaks are made stronger and more resistant to wear.

Fig. 24 Reinforced peaks

6.3 Fillings

Fig. 25 Weaving stitch

Fig. 26 Two or three ears in one peak of the previous row

When you make two (or more) ears, you can join their points together with a knot: this filling is called "rice grain" filling (see Fig. 38 below).
6.4 Circular Lace

The circle is the beginning of many Bulgarian Lace works; it is used for making round tablecloths, jewelery, or single decorative elements, like flowers, etc.

*Fig. 27 Circular Lace*

- **a) the beginning inner loop**
- **b) building the first row from the middle point**
- **c) enlarging the circle**

*Fig. 28 The steps for the construction of circular lace*

**Vertical rows:** Check out *Fig. 9* shown above. Vertical rows are used, for example, to make flower stems, or decorative ribbons.
7. Examples of motives

a) Construction of a triangle  

b) Finished triangles

Fig. 29 Simple triangle

Fig. 30 Triangle with crown

Fig. 31 Filled triangle

Fig. 32 Triangle with ears

Fig. 33 „Sunset“

Fig. 34 „A line of soldiers“

Fig. 35 „Loops in a line“
8. Lace nets

Fig. 36 Net with Rays

Fig. 37 Net with Ears

Fig. 38 Net with parallel Rice Grains

Fig. 39 Net with Rice Grains in a zigzag alignment

9. Complete basic Bulgarian Lace models

First row

Second row
You can substitute the Rice Grains with Ears.
Between the Bridges of the initial rows you have to create an odd number of peaks (three, five, seven, etc.).
The more peaks you make the wider the final lace will be.
10. Corners

To achieve neat, symmetrical and elegant corners you need to rotate your lace motives exactly at the tip of the corner. The number of motifs should be the same on all edges of your work, that is the same as saying that you rotate the motifs by 90°, creating a symmetrical rotation. (see Fig. 44-46)

Fig. 44 Working the corners

Fig 45 Handkerchiefs made by Mariana Brankina

Fig. 46 Table runner by Mariana Brankina
Since you need to have the same number of motifs you also need to have the same number of peaks. Refer back to point 5.4 (adding or eliminating a peak).

Now let’s say you are working on a rectangular piece (like a table runner), here you will have to split the edges (both the short ones and the long ones) exactly in the middle and work the same number of peaks, or motives, on both halves. This is the only way to obtain and maintain a perfect rotational symmetry on all four corners.

Here are three round coaster motifs, you are now able to try your hand by reproducing them on your own account. Enjoy.
Bibliography and Credits:

1. Elena Dickson: "Mediterranean Knotted lace", 2005, (Fig. 17-21, Fig. 28, 34 & 35))
2. Igne Oyalari, 2008 (Fig. 16)
3. Alice Kasparian: "Armenian Needlelace and Embroidery", 1983 (Fig. 12-15, Fig. 24, 29, 31, 32 & 42)
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