

The Ancient Craft of Parchment-Making In Western Turkey, 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAAO2b9Mguw>

Transcript of English and translated Turkish narration

Translation of the Turkish by Enes Taştan, May 2024

Narrator: İsmail Araç is one of the last artisans in the world who still makes parchment completely by hand. The 92-year-old spends one hour scraping every single piece of hair off a sheepskin.

Translation of İsmail's comments: I don't have strength, I have no power. But I'm enthusiastic.

Narrator: It can take a month to make one of the most durable canvases in the world. But this art nearly disappeared when mass-produced paper became a cheaper and faster alternative. And İsmail has struggled for years to find apprentices to train.

Translation of İsmail's comments: If I don't teach them now, this business will be closed. It's over. Parchment-making in Bergama ends.

Narrator: We went to Bergama in western Turkey to learn how this ancient craft is still standing. İsmail buys sheep and goat skins from a local warehouse. After doing it for 70 years, he can spot high-quality ones quickly.

Translation of İsmail's comments: Not every skin can make parchment. If they have holes or defects, we don't buy them. [We leave them]. We choose the good ones [good skin].

Narrator: He puts on his work clothes, tough boots, and a homespun nylon apron and begins the day. This was once a popular area for tanneries but now only İsmail's stone workshop has survived. He knew he was interested in making parchment since he was just 6 years old. He remembers leather tanners and parchment makers cleaning their hides near his home.

Translation of İsmail's comments: They wore aprons and had big knives [they had knives that big]. We were scared as hell. [There was a passage where they worked].

Narrator: He started his career as a leather tanner, too. Many of the skills he learned helped him master parchment-making.

Translation of İsmail's comments: After five years, I learned the craft completely. I said to my master, "Master, give your permission." I said, "I'll do it on my own."

Narrator: First, he uses a pump to wash the skins.

Translation of İsmail's comments: There is salt in the skin. The salt damages it. It is not good for parchment.

Narrator: He hangs the hides for 10 minutes before soaking them in lime water. The calcium hydroxide breaks down the hair and excess fat. The chemicals are harsh on human skin, but İsmail never wears gloves.

Translation of İsmail's comments: I have to get my hands on that skin. That's my bread and butter.

Narrator: The hides soak for five days. He has to be careful not to leave them in for too long.

Translation of İsmail's comments: The longer you leave it, the more it crumbles. It becomes jelly. You hold it in your hands, it melts down.

Narrator: This block of wood helps İsmail keep the hides in place as he cleans. Scraping the hair off is the most physically demanding part of the job. The curved knife, called a kavaleta, is extremely sharp, so he has to be precise to avoid damaging the skin.

Translation of İsmail's comments: If your hand slips a little, there is a hole.

Narrator: İsmail bends and scrapes both sides of the hide to get it as smooth as possible.

Translation of İsmail's comments: Tanning is active work. Not everyone can do it.

Narrator: For years, he did this work alone. It was not easy to find an apprentice willing to follow in his footsteps.

Translation of İsmail's comments: I have two children. They run away from it. They say the house stinks. What stinks? It is salted leather.

Narrator: İsmail nails the hide into a wooden board to stretch and dry. These nails are as old as he is.

Translation of İsmail's comments: These nails are from my master. When were they made? I'm guessing in 1933. I tried it with other nails. I tried them, but it left my hand covered in blood.

Narrator: He leaves the hides to dry for up to five days.

Translation of İsmail's comments: If you don't do this, there is no parchment. It shrinks. It becomes tiny. The skin will tell you when it is dry. It'll say "OK, I'm done."

Narrator: Parchment was first used over 2,000 years ago. It was invented in the ancient Greek city of Pergamon and became the main writing material across Europe by the Middle Ages. Its durability made it ideal for manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Magna Carta, and the Constitution of the United States. Early Christian monks wrote religious texts and formal documents on it. But gradually, paper took over as it became easier and cheaper to mass-produce. By the 15th century, scribes all over Europe had mostly switched to paper. The market for parchment dwindled, and in the following centuries, it never recovered. İsmail says many stopped making parchment altogether in his lifetime, but his passion for the craft kept him going.

Translation of İsmail's comments: It relaxes my body. My body relaxes. It's like I'm getting younger. I was in love with it. Maybe you were a goldsmith, a grocer. I have no interest in any of them. I have no interest in any of them. I have to have that scent. I have to get my hands on that skin.

Narrator: He's sold parchment to tourists and relied on leather sales to stay afloat. In 2006, he partnered with the Bergama Culture and Art Foundation to open the city's only parchment store: Pergamon Parchment. His reputation as a master parchment maker is what attracted local artists, Meltem Demirel and her husband, Sinan. The couple started out working in the store: painting, cutting, and packaging parchment for sale. Eventually, İsmail took them under his wing and accepted them as apprentices.

Translation of Meltem's comments: Once you get into it, you learn how difficult it is. But with patience, it gets better and better. It's also like therapy. Parchment is also an immortal paper. Whatever you write on it stays. So as the saying goes, the palest ink is better than the sharpest memory.

Narrator: Today, Meltem is also a master. But the couple still values still values İsmail's guidance.

Translation of İsmail's comments: OK, now we're going to do the sides.

Translation of Meltem's comment: Over there?

Translation of İsmail's comment: Yes.

Translation of Meltem's comments: Uncle İsmail, God bless him. He really taught us very good things.

Narrator: Now, they both run the shop by themselves. But just like İsmail did before them, the couple has struggled to find young people interested in learning the craft.

Translation of Sinan's comments: Apprentices first come to our shop and stay for two weeks. The next day they're gone. So, what happened? They say it's too dirty, too smelly. They don't come back.

Translation of Meltem's comments: [Of course it will be smelly.] This is not a lavender garden. This is a parchment house.

Narrator: Other than that, Meltem says business is going well. They work with government agencies that still use parchment paper for official records. And ship it to customers, all over the world. But their main clients live in the city. Clients, like Fatma Kayalı, who started using the material for her artwork 30 years ago. Today she gets her parchment exclusively from Meltem and Sinan.

Translation of Fatma's comments: Parchment is our national paper. I think our art adds value to it.

Narrator: Fatma showcases her work depicting scenes from nature at exhibits around the world.

Translation of Fatma's comments: I think works made with labor and love are immortal. Because nothing is actually lost in nature. Everything has a story of transformation.

Narrator: The physically demanding nature of parchment making became too difficult for İsmail and in 2020, he had to stop working full time. But Meltem and Sinan are determined to pick up where he left off.

Translation of Sinan's comments: This craft should remain, because you give life to a piece of paper. You're trying to revive a paper created before Christ.

Narrator: The couple now teaching the history of parchment at schools and through workshops to younger children.

Translation of Meltem's comments: In 10 years, 15 years, those children will come to us. We will start training apprentices in the future, God willing. I am hopeful. We have big plans for the future of parchment.

Narrator: As İsmail nears 100, he's focused on the legacy of the craft in Bergama, and he's confident he's left it in the right hands.

Translation of İsmail's comments: Let me be at peace. They have learned the art that I know. They didn't learn from here and there. They learned from İsmail.

End of narration

Text scrolling over the film while music plays:

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