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HELEN FAY STAMATI

# **the packsaddle**

A LIVING TRADITION ON A GREEK MOUNTAIN VILLAGE



G.C. ELEFThEROUdakIS S.A.



to Vangelis  
the packrider from Miles  
Fay

*A packsaddle in a Greek mountain village.*





## ***The packsaddler and his craft***

### ***Getting to know the packsaddler***

I first met Vangeli, the old saddler, at Milies on Mount Pelion, about five years ago, in a small workshop he had set up in the courtyard right next to his home. I had been told his work was the best in the whole area and wished to see for myself the packsaddles he made and to learn all I could about his craft. I soon realised that this good-natured, patient and hard-working craftsman is one of the last packsaddlers in Pelion, still working in the traditional way, exactly as he had been taught some fifty years ago by a saddler near Volos.

Ever since then, Vangeli has made a living for himself and his family with his own two hands. He built a home, lived through the war and the German occupation, survived the burning of his village and the earthquakes, paid all his debts and married off his two daughters.

### ***The start of his work***

Still an invalid, Vangeli had chosen this sedentary work more or less by necessity, having fallen seriously ill with osteomyelitis as a young pupil in the primary school.

He set up his first workshop at Milies in one of the cells of St. George's monastery next to the railway station. This spot was well chosen since many muleteers from the nearby villages passed by. They came on mule, horse and donkey, carrying goods and waiting for customers to arrive by train from Volos.

Though he was not the only saddler in Milies, many preferred him for his neat and careful work. Vangeli had no complaint; the pay was satisfactory.



*Milies in autumn.*





*Vangelis with his two daughters.*



*Vangelis on the Acropolis.*

### ***The war***

Then war broke out and work became harder. The saddler often had to work twenty hours a day. Many a time his pressure lamp would be burning till dawn and even so he was not able to fulfill all his orders. Soldiers brought back animals with badly damaged saddles or no saddles at all. Wood for his work was getting scarce. More than once he had to go all the way to Metsovo in search of wood, loading four or five beasts and leading them back to Milies on foot. Thinking about it now, he wonders how he was able to bear the stress, how he endured the spreading destruction of war.

«Those were dark days, my girl. We were surrounded by great misery and poverty. Yet thanks to my work, my family lacked nothing» he remembers.

### ***Milies is set on fire***

But the worst was yet to come. On October 3rd, 1943, the enemy set the whole village on fire, and Vangeli, as so many others, lost all his property within a few hours. His work-shop by the station was burnt down and his house badly damaged. The crop was lost. He himself, however, survived. He was lucky. Most families were in mourning, having lost at least one loved member.

His voice now becomes a whisper as he remembers those days. His eyes cloud over with grief. I feel embarrassed. Because of me, he has to go through all these horrid memories. But he insists on telling me all about it.

«I never thought of leaving Milies and giving up my work. Where could I go? This was my village, my little orchard, my home. I couldn't leave my neighbours, my friends, my church. How could I possibly abandon all this? My heart wouldn't let me...»



*Ruins from the great fire  
are still to be found in Milies.*



*Mules and donkeys  
are the only means of transport  
within the village.*



*Because of cobbled paths  
mules and donkeys  
will always be needed in Milies.*



### ***The new workshop***

Although an invalid, Vangeli was one of the first to clean up the ruins. He had to take care of his wife, the newborn baby she was holding in her arms, the donkey, his three goats and the few chicken that were left. But above all, he had to carry on with his work.

He set up his new workshop in the courtyard next to his home, to be near his family. He added a store for the wood and the straw, the leather and whatever else was needed in his work. He even laid a cobbled path, so that the villagers could now bring their animals right into his yard.

Work began almost immediately. Everyone sought Vangeli, bringing him half-burnt saddles to repair, waiting their turn for a new one. In those difficult days the animals kept going up and down the cobbled paths loaded with the charred remains of the great fire or carrying stones and wood to rebuild the village. Packsaddles were indispensable. Vangeli now worked harder than ever, spending many a night alone in his workshop seated next to the light of his small oil lamp.

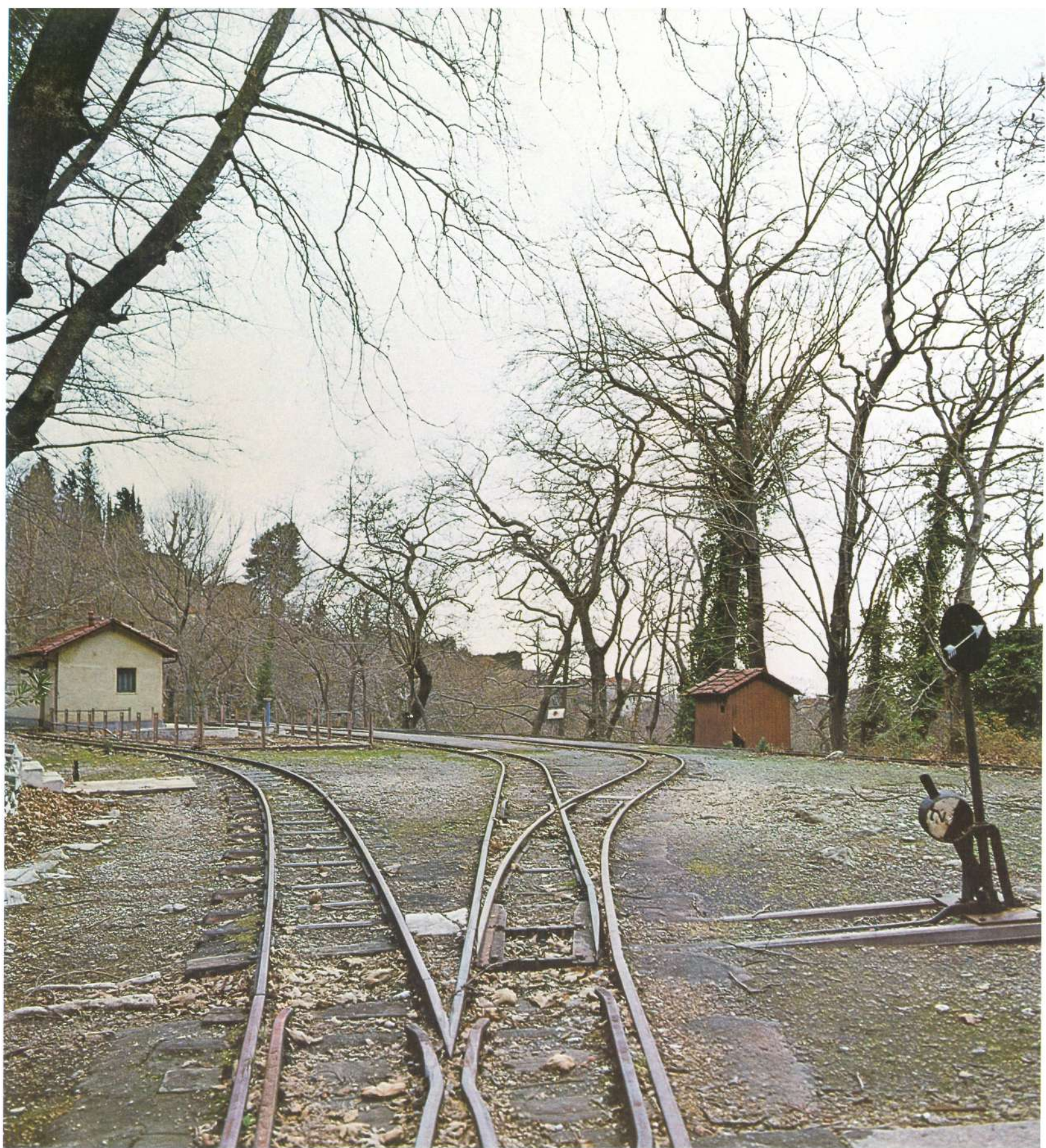
«But I was young then. My eyes and hands were young and I could work for two» he says.

Many years have gone by since. Life kept bringing its good and bad moments. Vangeli lived through more disasters. Floods, frosts and the terrible earthquakes of 1955.

When the main road was built, he saw the first bus arriving at Milies and a few years later he watched the local train leaving for Volos on its last journey.

The new road brought a great change to the life of the village. The station was gradually deserted and fewer muleteers from the nearby villages came to the saddler's workshop.







Vangeli sadly admits that nowadays a decent living can hardly be made as a packsaddle maker.

«And yet mules and donkeys will always be needed in our village,» he tells me thoughtfully, «because we have so many cobbled paths, and our farms and olive groves are far away and can't be reached by car. So my craft must not die out. I've been teaching a boy. He knows our craft well, but it is not a good living for both of us. I'm not that old, I can still work. I know I will still be making the best packsaddles».

### ***Our collaboration***

Every one in the village agrees that the packsaddles Vangeli makes are the best packsaddles of the area, so I went to him to learn about his craft. I arrived at his workshop every morning bringing with me my camera and taperecorder, sheets of paper and pencils, eager to watch him at work. We immediately got on to a warm footing, probably because he enjoyed teaching me the details of his craft, while I was really interested in learning. To him the packsaddle had been his life's work, while for me, that same saddle was gradually being transformed into a work of art. It surely was the result of experience, patience, and respect for old traditions. From the very first moment I had been impressed by the excellence of his work, and as days went by and I became familiar with all the details, I found myself admiring his toiling over the packsaddle.

### ***Ordering a packsaddle***

The first thing Vangeli taught me was that every packsaddle he makes is different. No villager buys it from him readymade. Each donkey has to be brought to the workshop for the craftsman to have a good look at it and take its measurements. The wooden frame and the mattress of the packsaddle must both fit perfectly onto the back of the beast.

«If the saddle doesn't "sit" properly on the animal, it's no good» the saddler tells me, «I have to measure the width of the back and the width of the neck because some beats are skinny, others are heavily built. I must measure the length for the ribs of the frame. I must see how the animal walks since some walk upright and others stoop. These details help me to make a perfect packsaddle».



*Vangeli takes measurements for the frame.*





*The saddler's workshop.*



## ***Making the frame***

Vangeli works mostly in his workshop, seated on a low wooden stool covered with an old red cushion. Beside him is a big tool box and on the shelves various parts of the frame.

He points out each part: the front piece and the back piece, the supports and the ribs, all made of wood.

«Look at the wood» he tells me. «It is of the very best quality, it has no knots. I have chosen it myself in Volos, piece by piece. The wood I buy is dry. If it's freshly cut it's no good for my work. Nowadays I have to keep my eyes open because they'll sell you the good with the bad».

Vangeli cuts the front piece, the back piece and the rounded supports out of beech wood which is strong and resistant. He uses acacia or mulberry wood for the ribs because it is more supple.

«I could use beech wood for the ribs as well, but this could straighten out again quickly, and the frame would loose its shape» he points out.

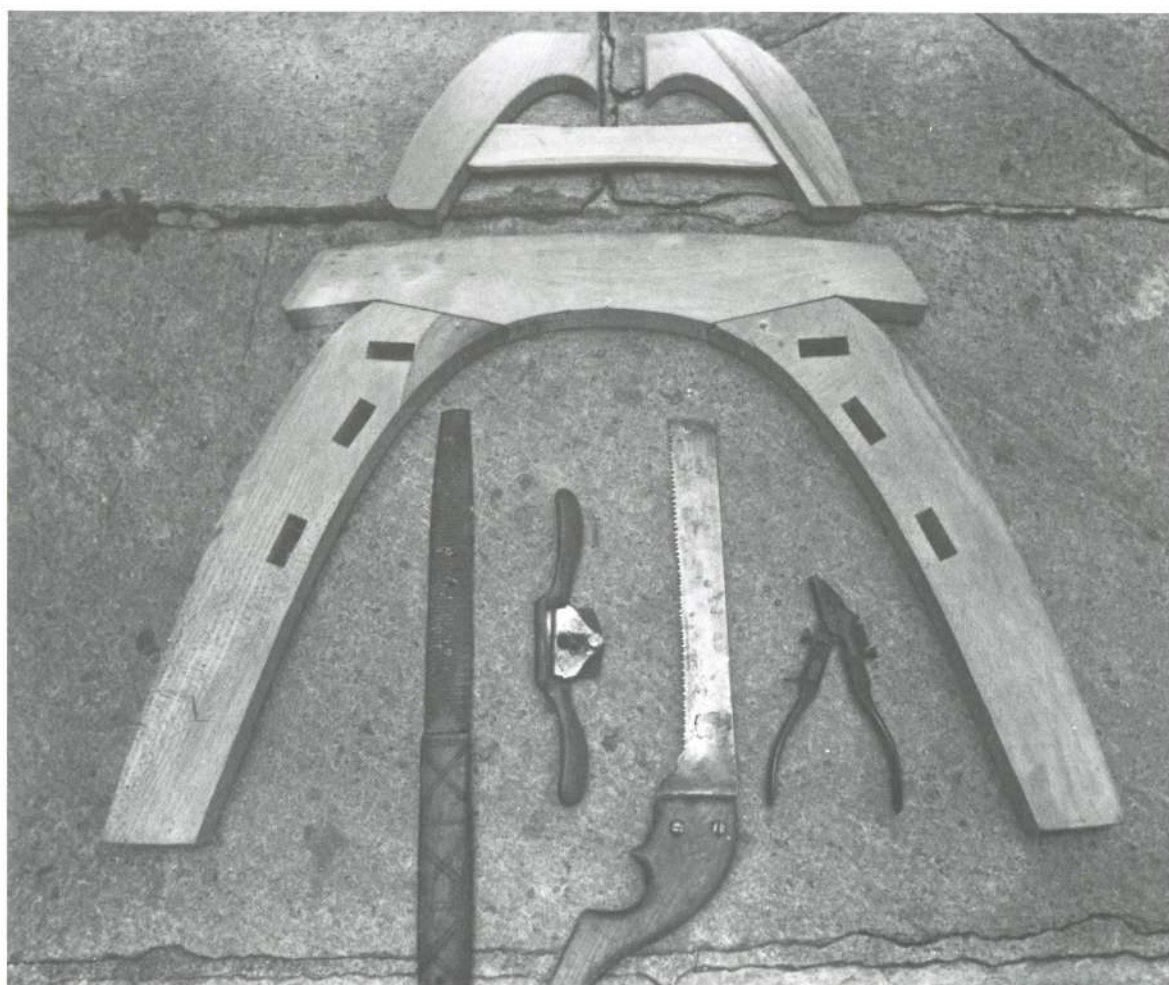
«Let me now show you how I bend the ribs».

*The saddler's tools.*





*The front piece.*    *The back piece.*





*Vangeli bends a rib.*

### ***Bending the ribs***

The packsaddle has three pairs of ribs. All six are bent. The lower and the middle pair must bend to fit the animal's side, while the third pair, known as the rider's ribs must bend to form a comfortable and safe seat for the rider. Looking at the six dead-straight pieces of wood, I simply can't understand how the saddler manages to get them to curve the right way.

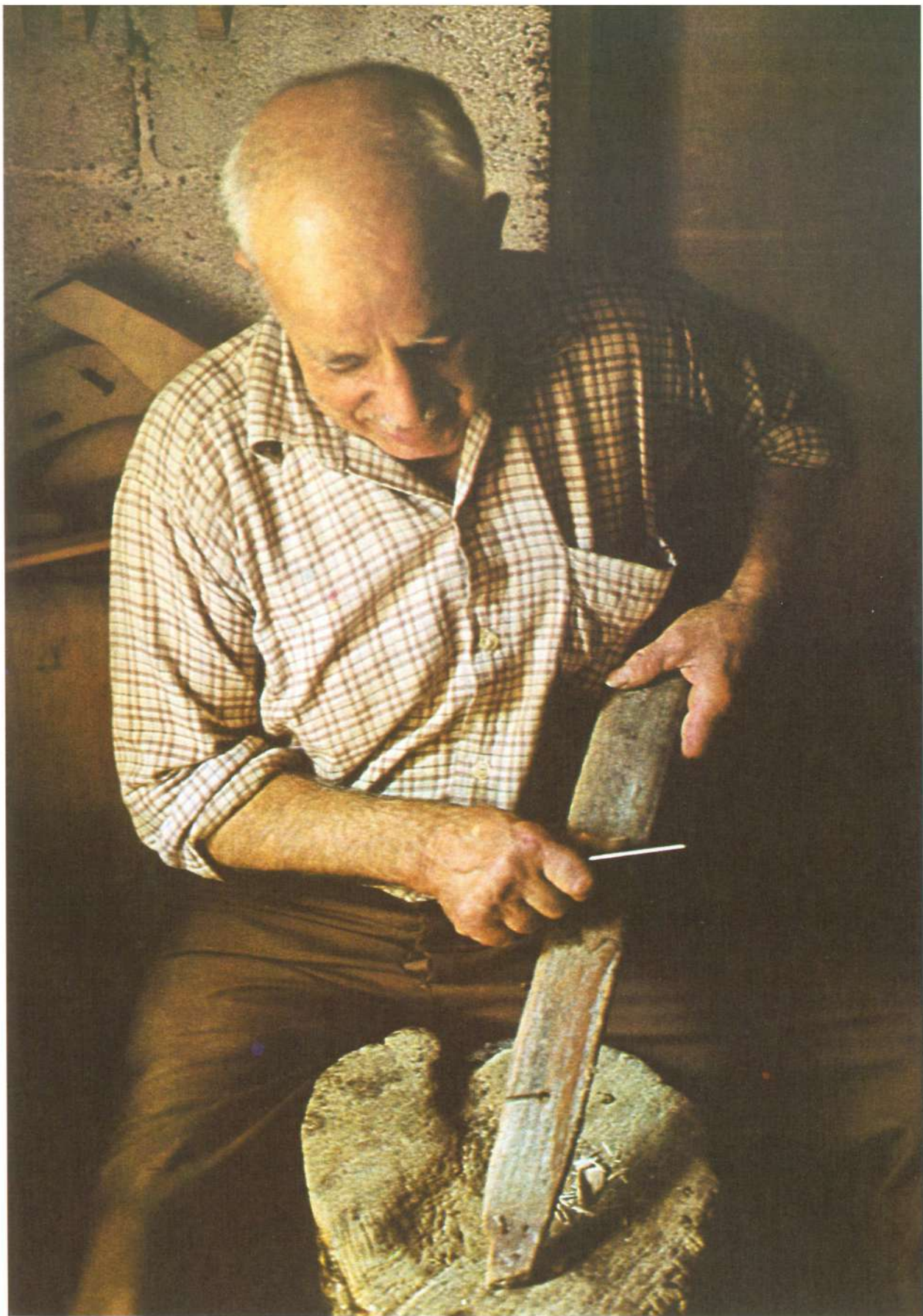
Vangeli explains:

«I soak the straight pieces of wood in water for one or two days till it starts to swell, then I take it out, one piece at a time, and hold it over the fire for two or three minutes, then I use a kind of ladder, I put the wood between two rungs and I start pressing on one end of the straight piece of wood till it starts bending exactly where I want it».

I ask to see his «ladder». I watch him while he bends the ribs, taking pictures of every movement. Once the ribs are bent, the saddler uses a file to round the angles and to carve the inner side of each one. He scrapes off the scorched parts and smooths the wood with sandpaper.



*The rib takes  
its final shape.*





### ***The front of the packsaddle***

When the six ribs are ready, the saddler starts making the front piece of the frame. I have learnt by now that the front piece is the part of the frame that fits over the animal's neck, therefore, the neck-opening must be cut according to the measurements taken when the order was given.

«The packsaddle is like a jacket or a coat», Vangeli tells me «it must fit perfectly on the beast».

Four slots must be made in the front piece, two on each side of the neck-opening, to fix the four side ribs. It takes a lot of skill and patience to make these slots. Vangeli marks each one using a compass and a ruler.

«If I'm not careful now» he tells me «the ribs won't fit in properly and the frame won't sit well on the beast and the heavy loads will shift from side to side as the animal climbs up and down the paths».

While Vangeli is working I look around his small workshop. I notice that everything is placed in perfect order, everything is clean and tidy. I walk across to the storeroom where he keeps wood, straw and leather, woolen material and sackcloth, and little boxes full of beads and amulets.

Soon Fotini, the saddler's daughter comes in, bringing a cup of coffee and a piece of home made baklava. We chat a little about her children, her life in Milies, her parents. I am aware of a tenderness in her voice when she speaks of her father.

«Nowadays he easily tires» she says as if to herself «we must look after him...»

It is midday by now and getting very hot. I feel I have to leave. Vangeli is still working at the slots. I promise to come back tomorrow.

At home I read through my notes and listen to the tape recorder. Next day I'm back at the workshop but the saddler is busy repairing an old frame which must be ready by noon.

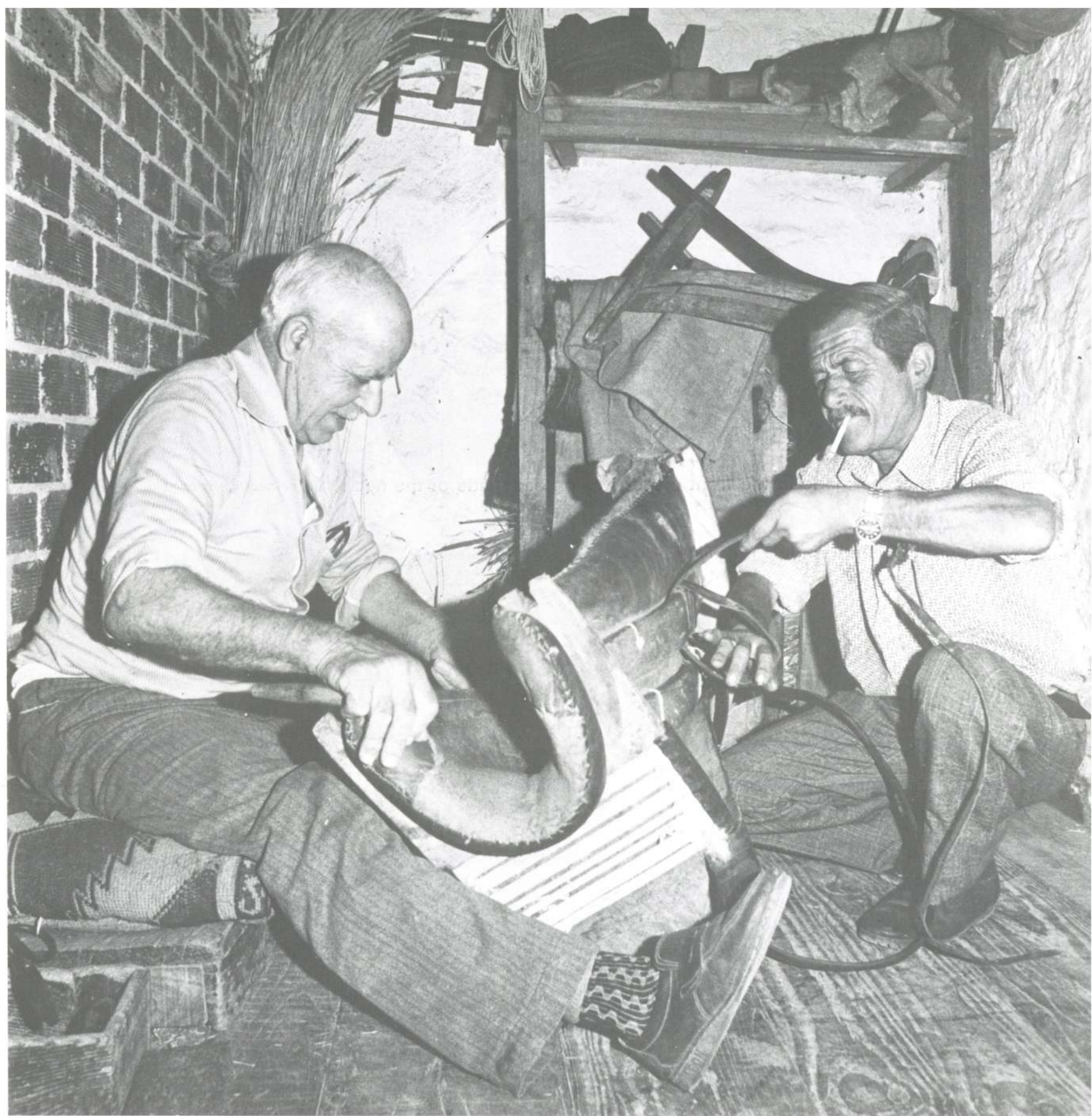
I see he is worried and realise I had better go.

«Come back this afternoon» he tells me. «I'll tell you all about the back piece of the packsaddle and its rounded supports».

*The neckline is opened  
in the front piece.*





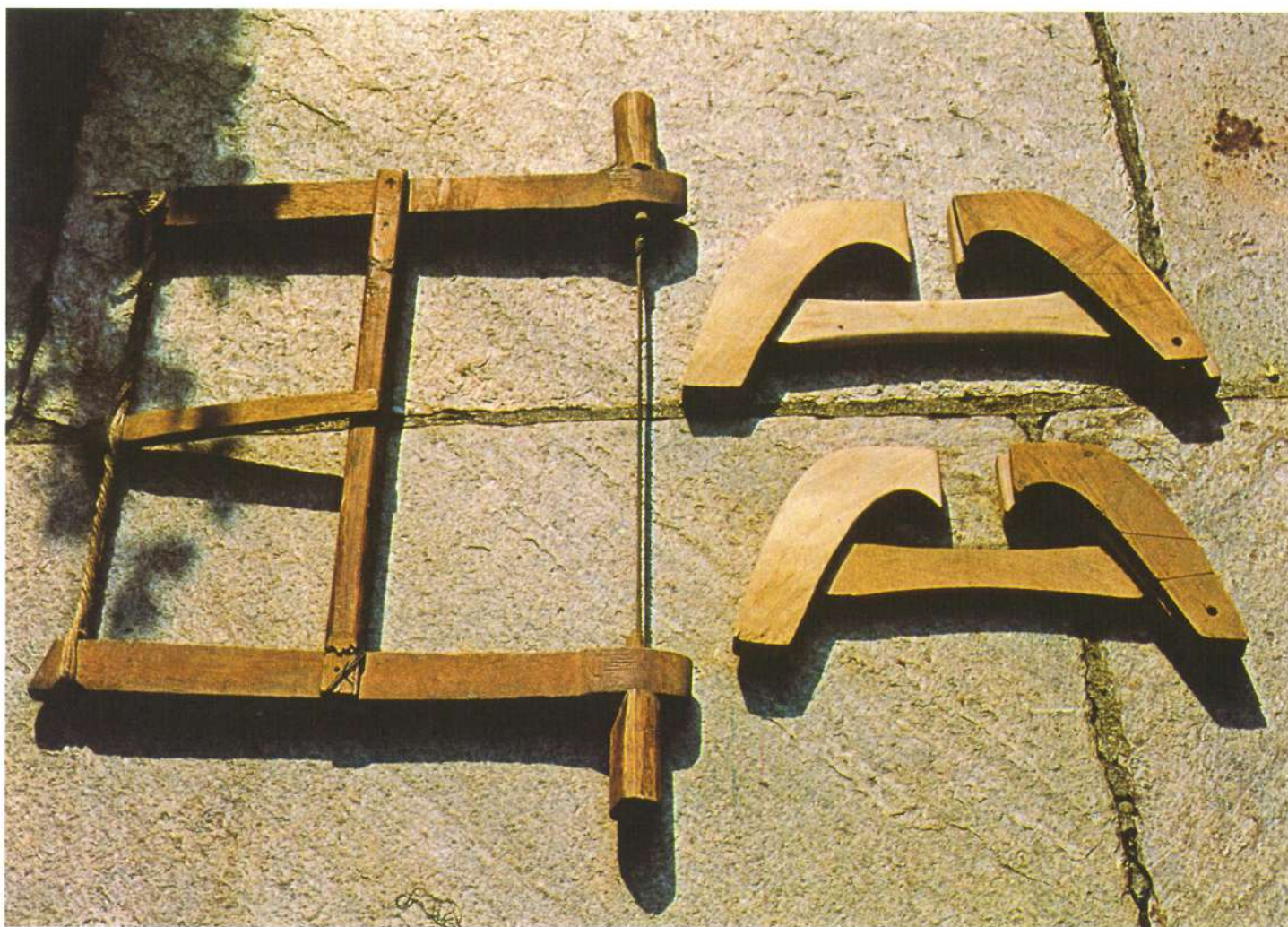




### ***The back piece and the supports***

The back piece is the part of the saddle which rests on the animal's hind-quarters. The opening must now be cut to fit the width of the animal. Four cuts for the side ribs are also necessary. But an extra two will be made for the ribs of the rider's seat. All six incisions are made as in the front piece. To the upper part of the back piece Vangeli will nail two supports. These supports are used by the rider to help him mount the animal. They are also used to tie the ropes that hold the heavy loads. Their size depends on the size of the packsaddle. They are made smaller for a donkey's saddle, larger for a mule's.

After three days of work all parts of the wooden frame were now ready and we could start putting the frame together.

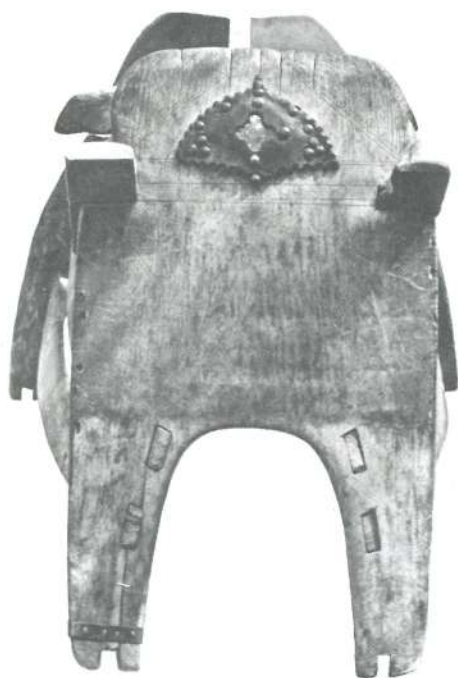


*The supports  
and the double file.*





*The supports are nailed  
and tied to the back piece.*



*The six ribs are fixed on the frame.  
The four side ribs  
to the right and left of the neck line.  
The two rider's ribs  
higher up on the front piece.*

### ***Putting the frame together***

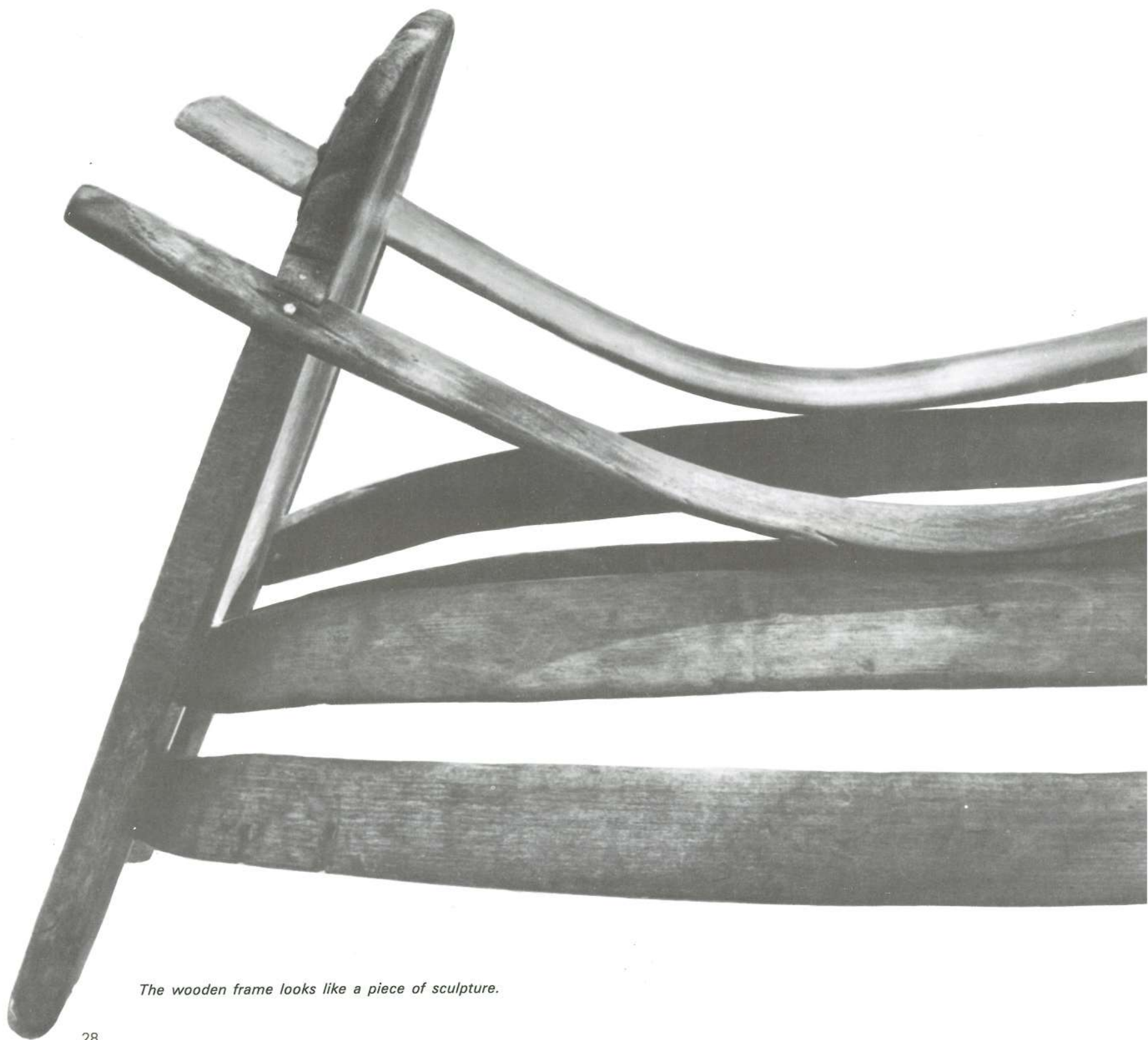
We left the workshop and went into the yard. I kept close to him following every movement, taking pictures, asking questions again and again, interrupting his work. I realised that I tired him but he didn't complain, on the contrary, he was always eager to explain. He must have been convinced by then that I was eager to learn all about his craft!

«While I'm nailing the frame together» he tells me, «I always have the animal in my mind. I try to remember how it walks, how it carries its head, because it helps me to make a perfect packsaddle».

I listen carefully and keep notes. I watch him while he is fixing the ribs to the front piece. It is one more long and difficult part of his work. I notice he puts a wooden stump on the floor and places the front piece on it. He takes a rib and tries to fit it into the opening. Then he nails it on.

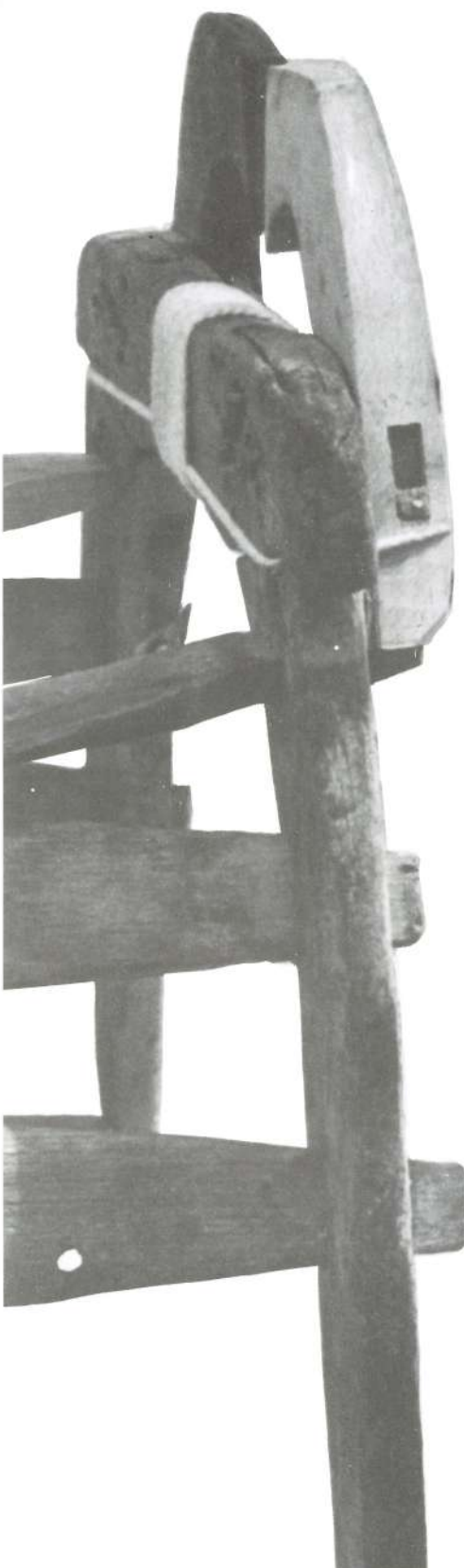
«Come closer now. I must show you this detail. Bring me those wooden pegs. Not metal ones, note I never use metal ones, if I can avoid it. Metal rusts quickly and rots the wood. My master taught me that many years ago in Agria. It's slow work for sure, but I don't make my saddles at the double quick. I want them to last long».

As he chatted he went on working, cutting small holes for each wooden peg, then fitting the ribs and glueing the pegs in place. When the ribs were firmly attached to the front piece, he measured their length according to the size of the frame and nailed them to the back piece.



*The wooden frame looks like a piece of sculpture.*





I want to take a picture of the frame but Vangeli tells me he has to nail the supports. I bring them to him, with four saddle nails and a bit of leather.

«I can't use wooden pegs now» he says «but I'll put a small piece of leather to protect the wood».

Having nailed the supports to the back piece, the saddler takes a look at the frame to make certain it is perfect. He is satisfied.

«It's good work. Now I've only to cut the "ears" on the front piece and two small holes on the lower ribs. Through the "ears" the farmer pulls and tightens the ropes that hold the heavy load. Through the holes, I will pass the thread and fasten the mattress to the frame».

Watching him at work I can't help thinking that making a packsaddle asks for a lot of patience and skill. I am fascinated and eager to see it finished.

«Be patient» he tells me, «it took me three long years to learn my craft.

Three whole years, and you want to learn all about it in three days».

Was it only three days since I first came to his workshop? It seemed far more than that. Yet thanks to him, I had already learnt so much.

The frame was ready. At last! All it needed now was a coat of varnish. Tomorrow Vangeli will cut the case for the mattress.



*The saddler cuts the case for the mattress.*



*Vangeli sews together the lining and the woolen material.*



### ***The mattress***

I managed to be in his workshop before eight o'clock but he must have been expecting me a little earlier because he had already brought out all he needed from the storeroom: two yards of grey woolen material, some sackcloth, an armful of straw, a pair of scissors, two huge needles and some string.

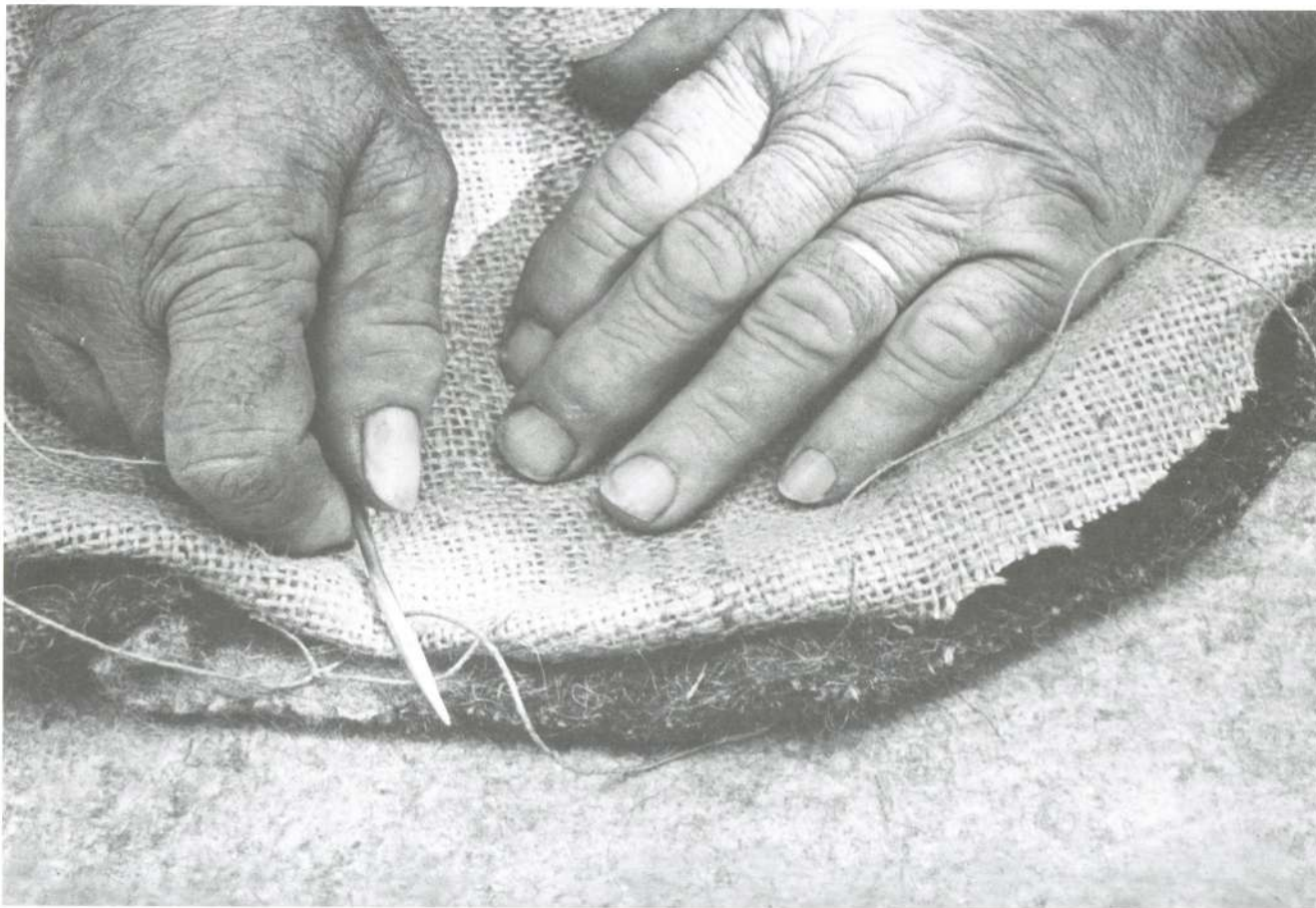
I was told that one could buy various qualities of woolen material for the case. Vangeli always got the best. It was tightly woven and about twenty inches wide.

«I don't buy it wider» he said «because its a shame to waste a lot of material».

The woolen material for the case of the mattress was cut according to the size of the frame. The lining, out of sackcloth, was cut just an inch wider all around to allow space for the filling.



*Sewing together  
the openings*



Vangeli starts making the case by sewing together the narrow sides to form the neck part of the mattress. When that is done, he turns the two materials inside out and with very big stitches he sews together the two wider sides to form the back part. The other two sides he leaves open. While he was sewing I had gone to the storeroom for some straw but he soon called me back.

«The case isn't ready yet. It still needs some work. I've to make the «pocket» and the «eyelets». Come and sit near me. I'll show you».

I brought out my camera and knelt beside him. With his big pair of scissors he made an opening below the centre of the neck part. He called that a «pocket» but to me it looked more like an enormous buttonhole. I told him so and he agreed.

«I've never thought of a buttonhole. I call it a «pocket». Now tell me, can you guess why I've cut out this pocket?»

As I don't know what to answer, he explains:

«It's so the beast can get some air through the opening. The mattress you know, covers all the back, the load is often very heavy...»

I now understand why the «pocket» is necessary and he goes on explaining about the «eyelets».

«The «eyelets» I make to separate the case of the mattress in two, so the straw doesn't shift later on from one side to the other. The mattress has to keep its good shape».

The case was now ready. But it was nearly ten o'clock and very hot. We couldn't stay out in the yard any longer. We moved back to his workshop where it was nice and cool.

Fotini who had already finished her morning chores, brought us two glasses of ice-cold water and some *loucoum* with pistachio nuts on a tray covered with a milky white lace napkin.





*The saddler  
sews the «pocket».*

«There is something sweet for you» she said and sat down with us.  
«How is the lesson going father?» she asked with a smile in her eyes.  
Still smiling she turned to me.

«You know he really enjoys talking to you about his work, even though  
he thinks it's odd that you, living in the city, should want to learn all  
about our packsaddles».

«Is that so?» I asked quietly, turning to look at him. «Is that really so?  
Have you never considered that your craft is slowly dying out and  
there'll come a day when one will only read about it in books?...»

He had a sad look in his eyes now.

«I know... That's why I'm telling you all about it. About my packsad-  
dles, because I still make them in the traditional way. Come now, let's  
get back to work. You've got to see me stuffing the mattress».



### ***Stuffing the mattress***

The filling of the case is done with straw. Vangeli had already brought two large armfull. It was now heaped up in the workshop next to him. I notice he sometimes uses the whole length of the straw, while at other times he breaks it in small pieces before stuffing it in. He starts by filling the back and the neck parts. He pulls from the heap as much straw as he needs, cuts the stalks to the required length, shorter for the neck part, longer for the back.



*Long stems of straw  
are needed for the stuffing.*



*Filling the front and the back piece of the case.*



*The saddler breaks the stems.*





*The seams are added to the sides of the mattress.*



*The case is ready.*







*Vangeli fits the mattress  
in the frame.*



He binds them and pushes them into the case, then lifts the case and bends it at both ends to break the stalks and give the mattress the necessary curve at the neck and back. The two sides of the mattress are filled one at a time, since the «pocket» and the «eyelets» separate the case into two parts. Vangeli now uses small pieces of straw. As he stuffs the sides, I notice that he adds stitches to the case to keep the straw in place.

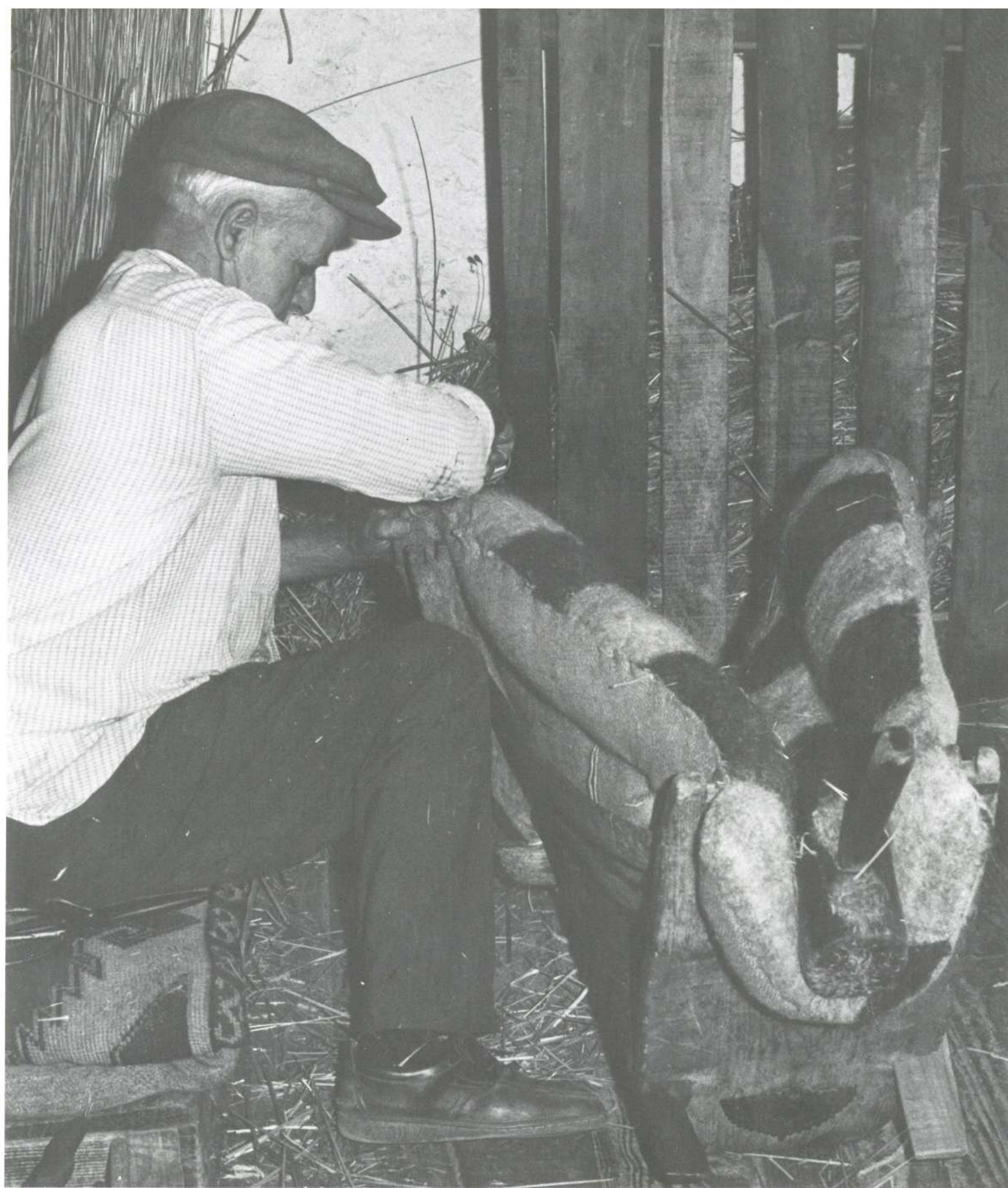
«The mattress must keep its shape even when heavily loaded,» he explains; «the straw must not shift»

Now Vangeli needs the frame. He asks me to bring it to him.

«Be careful that the varnish has dried» he calls out.

I went to the storeroom, found the frame and brought it out in the yard. There, in bright sunshine, it really looked beautiful! Like a work of modern sculpture. I picked it up, entered the workshop quietly and gazed at the saddler bent over his work. I said nothing, but my eyes fell on his two hands with the blue swollen veins, the knobs and marks, the scars left by old cuts.





### ***Fitting the mattress in the frame***

Vangeli was now ready to fit the mattress in the frame. He drew the frame in front of him, turned it upside down, put the mattress in and began beating it here and there turning it all around. It had to fit perfectly. He was quick to notice the slightest defect. If more straw was needed he undid the seams and added some.

«I want it to fit in perfectly» he kept saying. «My packsaddles must not hurt the beasts. Just think of the weight they have to carry, up and down the steep cobbled paths, in the summer heat, in rain and cold. The mattresses I have to repair are often full of dried blood stains. I can't bare to think of the animals suffering. My packsaddles must be kind to the beasts. That's why my job is difficult»

«Very difficult indeed» I said, «I am learning that. Shall I come back tomorrow? You must be tired by now».

«Yes, come tomorrow. I was up at dawn. I do feel tired. Tomorrow I'll put the leather over the mattress. I'll put it now to soak in water otherwise it won't stretch easily, it'll be too tough»

I thanked him and left. Climbing the cobbled path under the hot dry sun, heavily loaded with my cameras and tape recorder, I kept thinking of Vangeli and his life in the village, of the many things I had learnt watching him at work day after day.

«I shall never tire of coming to Milies» I told myself «There's so much to see and learn. This village is still so very much alive. Vangeli is not the only craftsman working in the traditional way. There's a blacksmith and a mason, a smith and a carpenter. In time I'll learn all about their crafts as well. Then I'll find out about their customs and their way of life. I'll probably learn to make sweets and pies but there's one thing I'll never learn and that's knitting. I'll never learn how to knit».

*Sewing together  
the large openings  
of the mattress.*







### ***The leather is passed on the mattress***

Next morning I made an early start but I couldn't resist stopping on the way to pick some figs, for days now I had longed to eat them fresh from the tree. When I finally arrived at the workshop, Vangeli was already at work. He had removed the mattress from the frame and was passing the wet piece of leather over it.

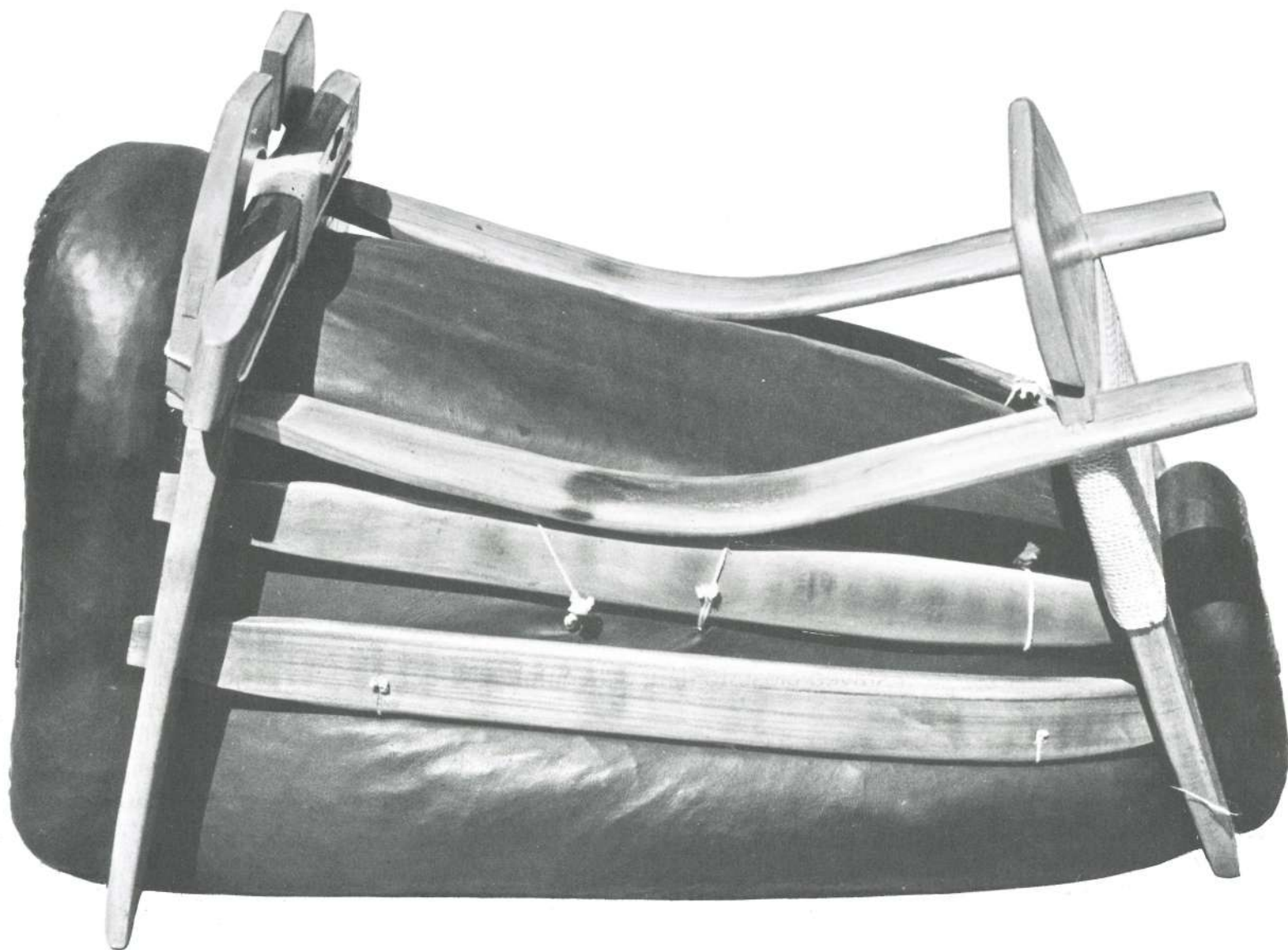
I noticed he had some sackcloth on his knees to keep his trousers dry. He scolded me a little for being late. I hastily set my camera, snapped two or three shots and went to sit right next to him on a little low stool, so that I could closely follow every movement. I watched him stretching the leather here and there, then sewing it on with large stitches.

«If I don't sew it on, it will slip off when I lift the mattress to fit it into the frame» he explains.

*Attaching the mattress  
to the wooden frame.*



*The frame  
and mattress  
of the packsaddle.*



### ***The mattress is attached to the frame***

The mattress is first attached to the two lower ribs of the frame with thick string. Vangeli uses a long needle with a big eye and firmly pushes it through the two small holes he had previously opened on each rib. Once the mattress is fastened to these four places, he attaches it to the middle ribs and finally to the centre of the back piece.

«There» he tells me. «The mattress and the frame are assembled now. But I'm not finished yet. I still have to work a little on the corners of the mattress. They are stiff and hard as they are. They'll hurt the animal. I must undo the seams and cut away some straw. I must give each corner a nice smooth curve. That's quite a job. It takes time. Go and have a little chat with Fotini, ask her to show you how she makes our famous *trachana* soup and tell her to bring me a bite, some bread and cheese will do, and coffee».

I stayed close to him, watching him work on the first corner of the mattress, then went to the kitchen. When I returned about an hour later, he was sipping his coffee.

«I've been waiting for you» he said «because there's one more thing I have to tell you about the packsaddle. I forgot all about the two small cushions of the mattress».

«Cushions?» I asked. «Why cushions?»

«We have to make cushions on the inside of the mattress, one on each side, so that it doesn't sit heavily on the back of the beast» he replied. «These two small cushions give it a certain height and the animal can move its forelegs more easily».



*The saddler works on the corners of the mattress.*





*The leather is sewn to the mattress.*





### ***Sewing on the leather***

He made me take a picture of the mattress showing the cushions. Then asked me to come and watch him sewing the leather onto the mattress. He used black string now to match the colour of the goat's skin. The stitches he made were very small, very neat and close to one another.

When the leather was sewn all around he cut two more pieces and stitched them tightly over the lining, at the back of the mattress, to prevent the sackcloth from wearing out quickly.

Finally a bit of red felt was added round the neck-opening of the mattress. I thought it was meant to give a bright touch of colour to the packsaddle but Vangeli explained that felt would feel nice and soft round the animal's neck.



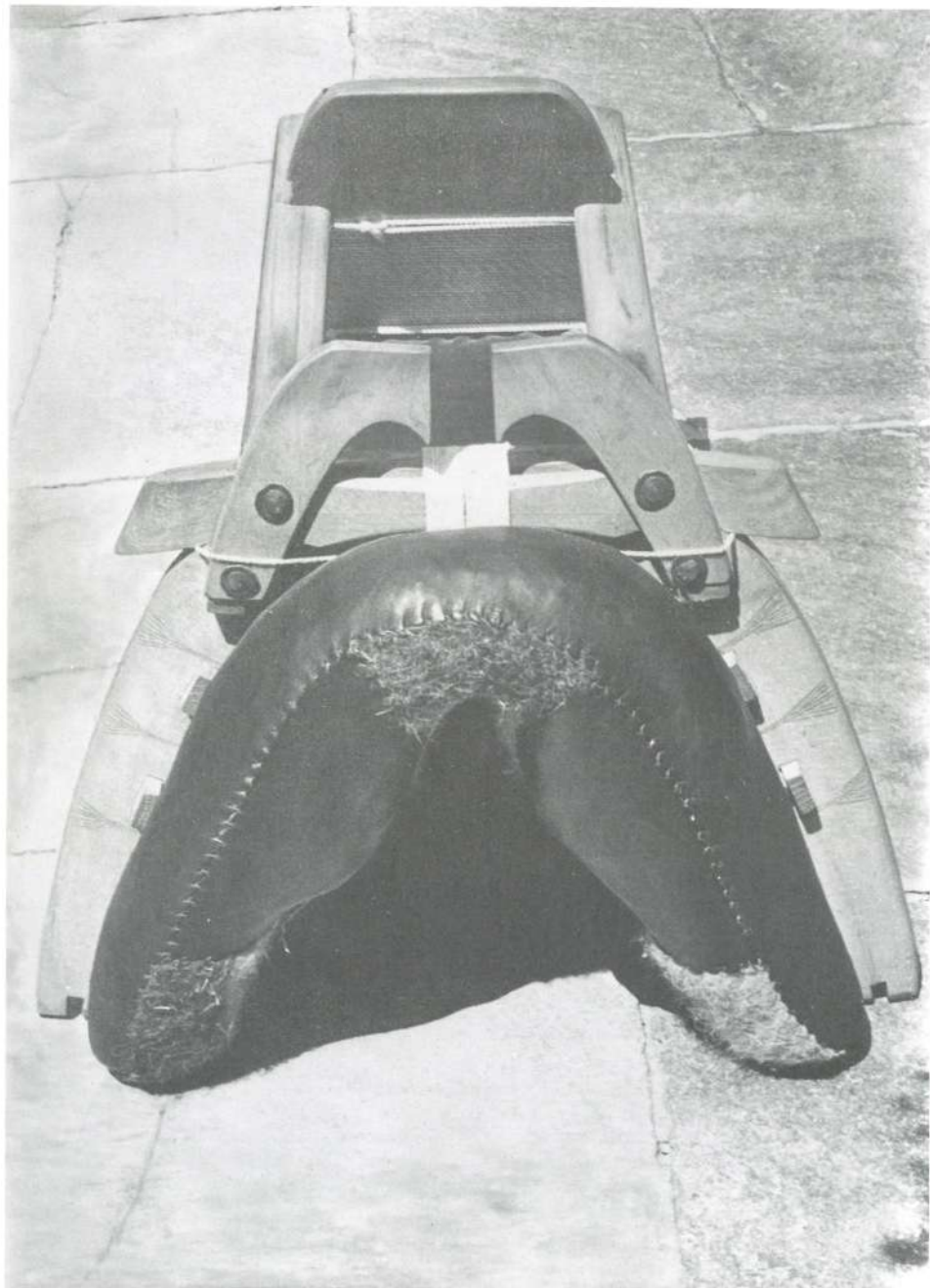
*Vangeli stuffs the cushions.*





*The mattress of the packsaddle.*

*Two pieces of leather  
are sewn over the woolen material.*



*Red felt is sewn  
round the neckline.*





### ***Decorating the packsaddle***

«Our saddle now looks quite lovely» I said to him.

«Yes it does» he agreed. «And how would you like it if we were to add some little extra work? Our customer will certainly pay the difference. We'll decorate the front piece and you can help. Go, tell my grandson to bring beads, brass nails and some thin white rope. I think we've one more horseshoe left, tell him to bring that too».

I was delighted, and when the boy came back carrying all he could get hold of, we spent the rest of the morning making patterns. It was great fun. In the end, we decided to wind some thin white rope round the front piece, nail on the horseshoe and add a big blue bead against the evil eye.

«Perfect, it's perfect!» I heard myself crying out full of enthusiasm. I couldn't take my eyes off it, it looked so beautiful! But Fotini and Panayoti looked at me in surprise. They just couldn't understand why I made such a fuss over a simple packsaddle. They looked at one another and smiled.

Vangeli however said nothing. He remained silent. I went up to him.

«Aren't you proud?» I asked him «Aren't you pleased with your work?»

He turned to look at me

«I'm thinking» he replied «and I'm worried. I want to know if you've understood all I've been telling you. Maybe you have written it down all wrong. Maybe I didn't explain too well. Maybe I forgot to tell you something. Packsaddles are difficult to make. You've seen me working only once. Yes, I'm worried».

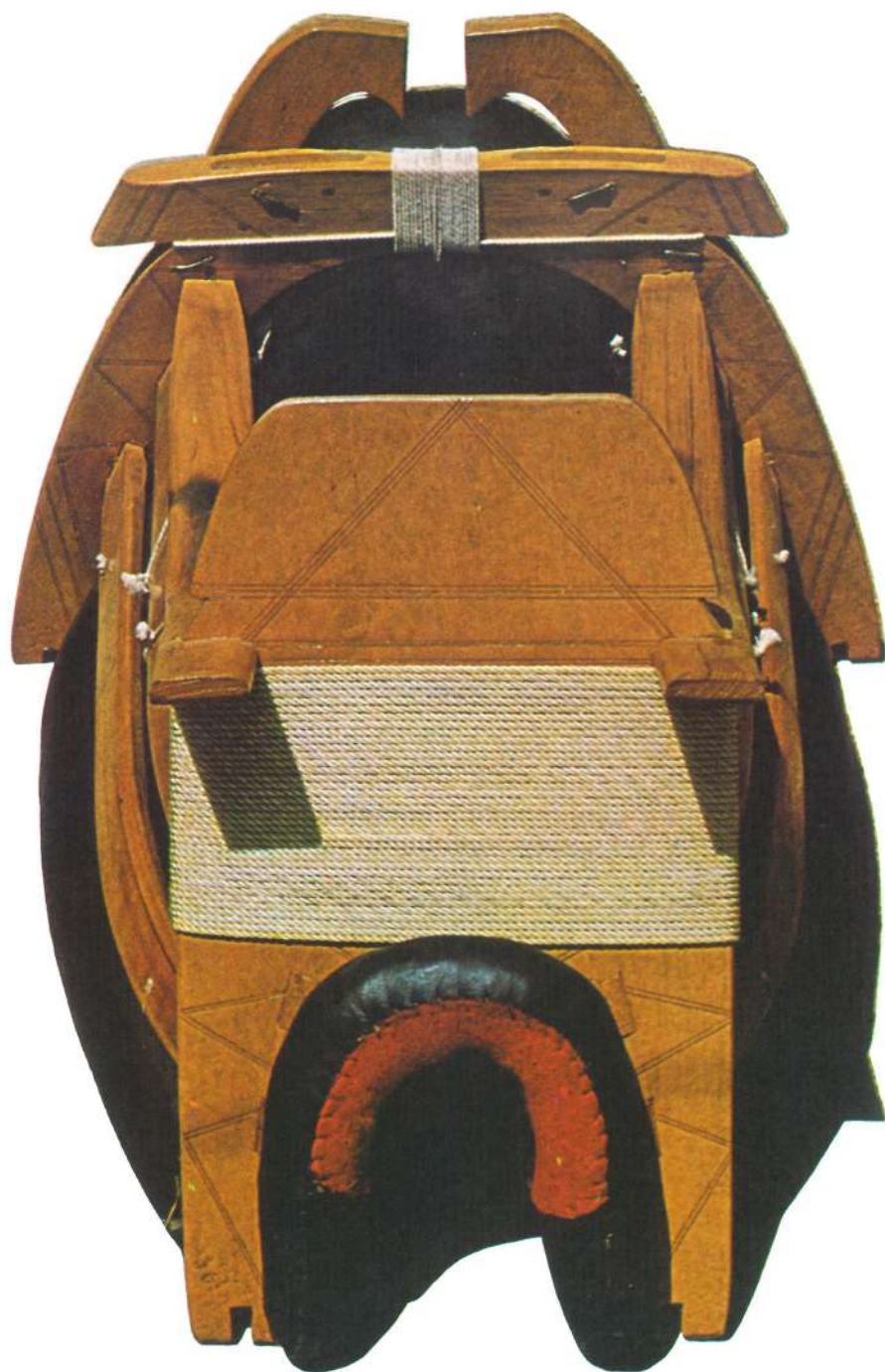
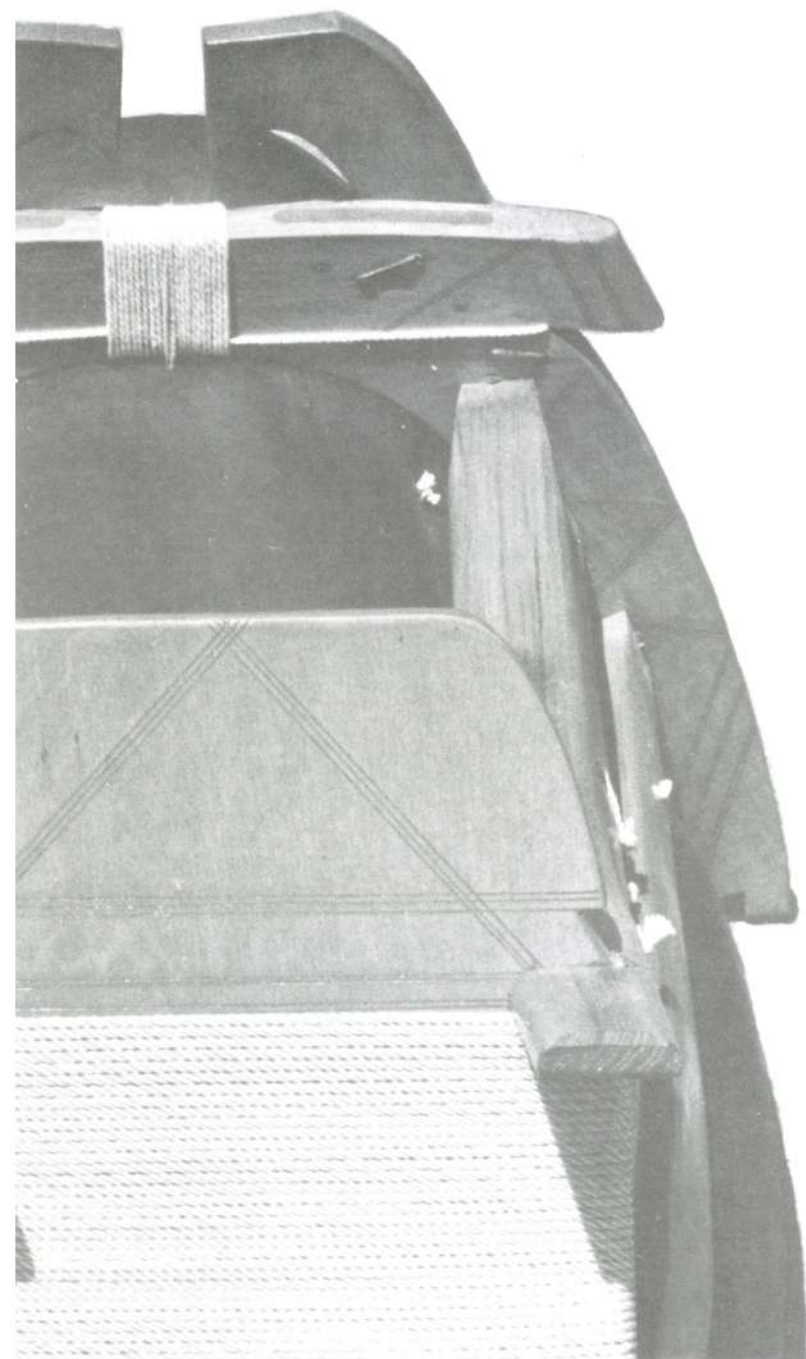
He really was. I sat down next to him.

«You've been so patient with me» I reassured him. «You've shown me all the details of your work. You've answered all my questions. I feel I've learnt so much. I will go home and try to work on it. But I'll come back and read the text to you, I'll show you all my pictures. We'll work together once again. You will correct all my mistakes. We'll try and do our best».

That seemed to make him feel a little better.

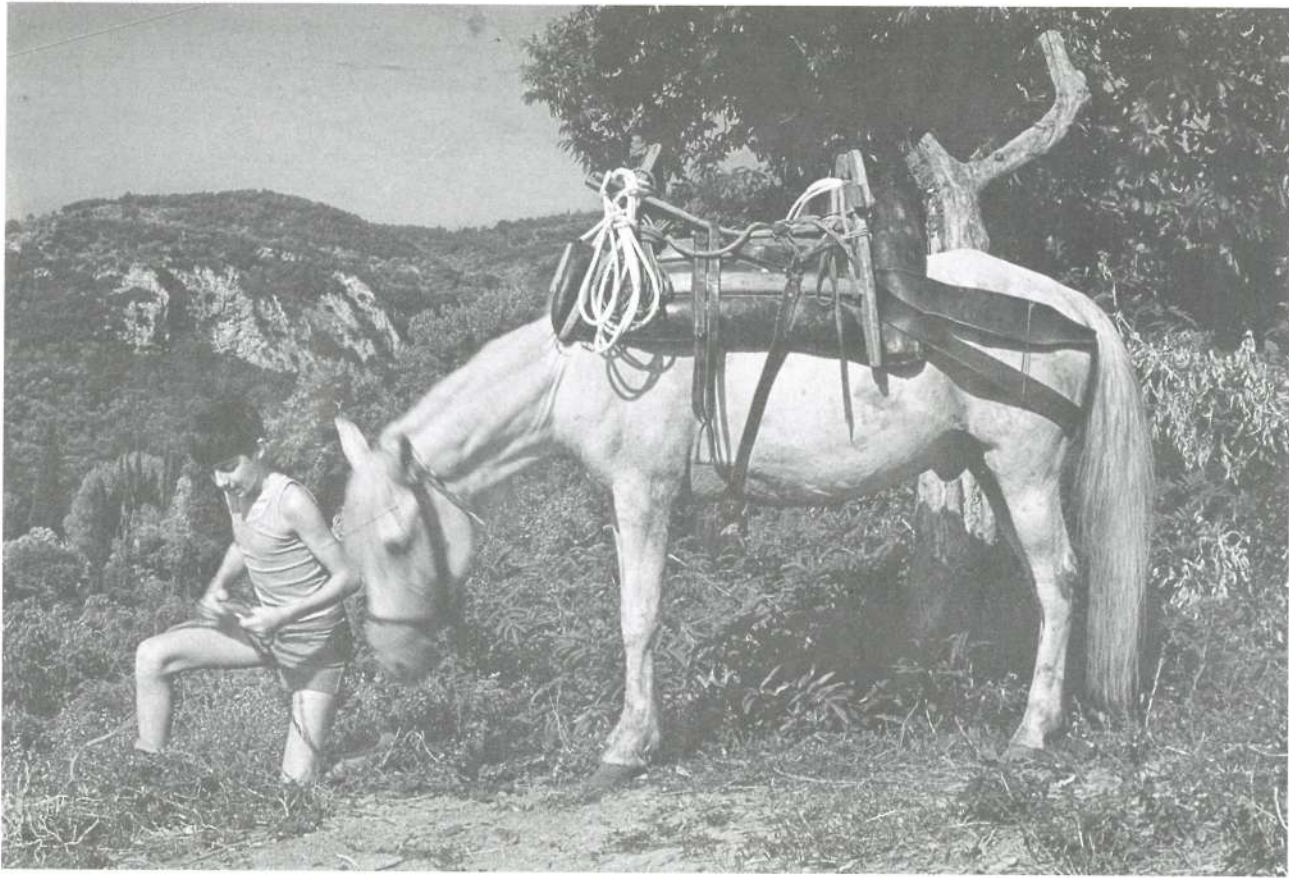
«That's right» he said. «We'll do our very best».





*The packsaddle is decorated  
with geometrical designs  
and thin white rope.*





*The packsaddle is tied to the animal.*

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