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Ceramics, Cuisine and Culture: The Archaeology and Science of Kitchen Pottery in the Ancient Mediterranean World

Michela Spataro, Alexandra Villing, *Ceramics, Cuisine and Culture: The Archaeology and Science of Kitchen Pottery in the Ancient Mediterranean World*. Oxford; Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2015. viii, 278. ISBN 9781782979470 $80.00.

Review by

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[The author apologizes for the lateness of this review.]

Kitchen pottery has never been a popular research subject in Mediterranean archaeology. Surely, millions of cooking pot sherds have been thrown away as undateable, uninteresting coarse ware. Although complete excavated cooking pots were often kept, and even put on display in museums to illustrate household activities, especially in ‘Classical’ contexts study has mostly remained limited to basic typology and chronology and elementary discussion of the functioning of specific types of pots.

In processual prehistoric archaeology, cooking and food received somewhat more attention, though with a strong practical, social and ecological focus.

However, in recent decades things have changed, stimulated by developments in analytical technology, the popularity of 'chaîne opératoire'-based approaches to pottery and the growing interest in the technical and material aspects of objects, also beyond processual approaches. Moreover, the archaeology of daily life has been rediscovered as a field where much remains to be explored. Several of these trends come together in the 23 papers collected in this volume, which form a varied showcase of new approaches and possibilities. Together, they give a good impression of this large and lively academic field. Indeed, it may be time to shed the slight inferiority complex displayed through the often repeated and almost ritual apologies for the newness and the lack of existing work, also expressed in the introductions of many of the papers in this volume. Studying kitchen pottery has clearly outgrown its infancy.

In fact, I would say that is exactly the implicit message of the long introductory chapter "Investigating ceramics, cuisine and culture—past, present and future," by the editors of the volume, Alexandra Villing and Michela Spataro. In just 14 text pages densely packed with information (and a five-page double-column bibliography) they offer an extremely thorough review of ancient cooking pottery, cuisine and food culture. There is hardly a relevant issue they do not touch upon, which in some cases even leads to answers to questions brought up in some of the following papers. Several of the issues treated in the introduction overlap with those discussed in more detail in specialists' contributions. Perhaps it would have been more balanced to include these in a final synthesis, which would also have allowed a more explicit engagement with the content of individual papers. On the other hand, the chapter as it is now is an excellent, somewhat encyclopaedic, introduction to the subject which I would recommend to anyone starting to do research on kitchen pottery and the archaeology of ancient cuisine.

Some confusion because of the overwhelming richness is also what comes up in the further organization of the book, as the editors acknowledge themselves. The papers are divided among three thematic parts, primarily dedicated to ceramic (but also cooking) technology (in Part I. "How to make a perfect cooking pot: technical choices between tradition and innovation"), the actual cooking, though seen through a ceramic/casserole-focused lens (in Part 2, "Lifting the lid on ancient cuisine: understanding cooking as socio-economic practice") and the ways cooking and cooking pots can be seen as cultural markers in areas where cultures meet (in Part 3, "New pots, new recipes? Changing tastes, culinary identities and cross-cultural encounters"). While this division is in itself clear, only the third and much of the first part really offer what they seem to promise, while the second part in particular is a somewhat awkward mix of papers exploring a variety of themes, including a real outlier on pots used to breed dormice (chapter 15). While these are certainly related to cuisine, the contribution is hardly about cooking, but rather about taste and status, and may have fitted better in part 3. On the other hand, Susan Rotroff's excellent summary of the development and relative frequency of cooking pot types in Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic Athens (chapter 16) only touches upon the themes of part 3 where it is placed. Readers should be aware that articles relevant to them may not be found where they expect them, and that some contributions spread over the book actually from interesting coherent combinations, which may be overlooked by readers focusing on single chapters or parts.

Thus, the primarily descriptive contributions focusing on materials analysis (chapters 2, 3, 4, 11, also partly 8 and 9) offer a comprehensive view of the ways fabric composition and shapes may be related to functional characteristics (heating efficiency, resistance to thermal shock and breaking) on the one hand and ways of use (cooking technologies, connection between shape and contents) on the other. While some of the resulting insights may not be surprising, the underlying research methods and most of the examples and modelling approaches offered are surely innovative and

exemplary. Precisely when viewed in combination, these chapters could be seen as the starting point for a new, more systematic and holistic approach to cooking pot and cooking technology, or can simply form the inspiration, and offer parameters, for new case studies.

A similarly complementary set can be found in the again primarily descriptive group of chapters based on ethnographic research and/or archaeological interpretations of early modern and recent workshop practices and materials (chapters 5, 10, 14), which can profitably be studied with the final chapter on 19 th -20 th -century cooking pots in Greece, which is placed on its own at the end. Although none of these chapters offers very striking insights in itself, together they offer an interesting overview of much of the chaîne opératoire of the cooking pot, nicely interacting with the ancient cases around them.

Of course, grouping so many papers with such varied contents can never be perfect, and part of the 'problem' of ordering them is also rooted in the interdisciplinary approach of many of the chapters, and the very welcome combination of new data and fresh interpretation most offer. Precisely because the field is relatively young, there is much new to explore, from the already mentioned heating efficiency of clays and shapes (chapters 2, 3, 4, 9) to connections between pottery shapes and culinary developments (chapters 7, 10, 12, 13, 17, 18, 20) or the varied responses to the introduction of 'foreign' kitchen pots, production technology, cooking traditions and cuisine in different areas (part 3, but also chapters 7, 8, 14), to name just a few.

Not entirely new, but quite revealing is how many of the papers show that humble cooking pots were traded over long distances from early on, because of technical qualities and/or their association with functional and identity aspects. Thus, the article on Cretan Early Iron Age material by James Whitley and Marie-Claude Boileau offers a convincing detailed analysis of possible explanations for imitation and imports in a specific, and perhaps surprising, context, while Walter Gauss et al. offer a more

general view of the long term popularity of Aeginetan cooking pots in the Aegean and beyond. Susan Rotroff then shows, almost in passing, how Aeginetan (and later other) imports had a major impact in Athens, affecting both local consumption (and presumably cooking) patterns and ceramic production. In the following articles in part 3, particularly those by Anne-Marie Curé and Alessandro Quercia, on assemblages from respectively Southern Gaul and Lucania during the Greek colonial period, impressive, more refined analyses of the interaction between 'local' and 'imported' artefacts, ceramic traditions and ways of cooking and eating are offered. All these articles (and ones I do not mention explicitly here) clearly show how precise contextual research, combining pottery studies and find statistics with insights about cooking habits and food preferences, can offer detailed information about crucial aspects of daily life, social organisation and cultural identities. Of course, many questions remain and new ones appear, and the struggle to get from pots to people is not always completely successful—answers, in the end, often retain a somewhat hypothetical or even arbitrary flavour—but these papers do show that an integrated approach to 'kitchen archaeology' literally bring us as close to the ancient home as we can get.

Unwillingly, this point is also illustrated by the two papers in the volume which are most strongly based on historical sources. Elizabeth Langridge-Noti offers thoughtful analyses of both written evidence on food consumption in Laconia and kitchen pottery from the excavations of Hellenistic Geraki, but in the end the conclusions derived from combining the two quite distinct sources of information remain generic and tentative. On the one hand, we simply do not seem to know enough (yet) about functional aspects of archaeological material, while on the other hand data on food consumption often cannot be connected very easily to material aspects of food processing and preparation. Bringing the two together therefore remains difficult, particularly in a rather basic assemblage like that at Geraki. Andrew James Donnelly's detailed study of the pots mentioned in Late Antique cookbooks leads to an apparently

convincing sketch of developing cooking practices, but leaves one wondering about the archaeological counterpart—also because the author himself offers a set of concluding observations and questions which mostly could be (and partly have been) addressed through archaeology. Obviously, such quibbles are only relative, and would probably not have arisen in a book less full of ideas.

As may be clear from the above, this volume is essential for everyone interested in the field, both as a reference work offering many exemplary cases, and as a source of inspiration, offering data and hypotheses which could be further researched, but also a starting point for new ideas and approaches. It also offers a very strong case for the strength of holistic approaches, not only in single case studies, but also in their combination. Precisely the cross-cultural and multi-period set-up of this volume leads to striking juxtapositions of methods and results, which greatly enhance the innovative power of the parts. The production quality (text editing, lay out and images) is excellent overall, also considering the rich and varied contents of the book, and the selling price very friendly.

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