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Cultural biographies of Cretan storage jars (pithoi)

From antiquity to postmodernity

Ximeri, S.

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INTRODUCTION

In October 1909 the Sicilian writer and playwright Luigi Pirandello (1909) published a short story entitled '*The Jar'* (*La Giara*)[1]. The tale is set in a small Sicilian village during a high-yielding olive harvest, and revolves around the making, breaking and mending of a storage jar. The enormous ceramic pot is the protagonist in a series of incidents and accidents, becoming the catalyst around which the main characters develop and allowing aspects of everyday life in the local community to emerge[2].

In '*The Jar'*, Don Lollò Zirafa is the wealthy and powerful but litigious and oppressive landowner of the village. In anticipation of a very prolific year, he acquires an enormous, expensive storage jar. When the pot is temporarily placed in a winepress shed overnight, it mysteriously ends up broken in two. In great grief and agony over the damage to his most prized possession, Don Lollò calls to the rescue Zi' Dima, a pottery mender famous for his skills and his secret pottery-glue recipe. Zi' Dima moves the pot to the middle of the village square, gets inside and, under the intent gaze of the villagers and farmers, he sets to mending it. But whilst the repairing process is successful, the craftsman gets so carried away that he ends up sealing himself inside the pot. The glue and wire rivets applied to it are so strong that breaking the pot is the only way to free him. The onlookers are thus caught on the horns of a collective dilemma: should they rescue Zi' Dima by breaking the pot completely and face Don Lollò's anger, or should they preserve his most treasured purchase and let Zi' Dima sit in captivity? The mender decides to take the matter into his own hands. He happily settles into the jar and gives the money for the repairs to the villagers who then use it to buy food and wine. And so, a public fiesta held around the jar gets underway. Upon his return to the village, Don Lollò witnesses the celebration around his now mended but useless pot, and in furious anger, overturns it

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[1] In memory of Wilbert Cornelissen (1958-2018), secretary of the Amsterdam Centre for Ancient Studies and Archaeology at UvA, who, during conversations over Dutch gin and Greek drama, brought this story to my attention; he is greatly missed. Special thanks to Antonis Kotsonas for encouraging me to use this story as an inspiration for the thesis.

[2] 'La Giara' was included in a collective volume of short stories entitled 'Novelle per un anno' published in 1922 and it instantly gained prominence amongst the stories. In 1984 it appeared in 'Kaos', a loose film adaptation of four pieces from 'Novelle per un anno', directed by the Taviani brothers.

and sets it rolling down towards the coast. Accompanied by the laughter of the drunken villagers and its inhabitant, the jar spins away until it strikes an olive tree and breaks apart, ultimately setting Zi' Dima free.

In Pirandello's story the jar represents the power of the wealthy landowner and his hold over the villagers; it serves as an object that bonds a community of people together in a small communal celebration and it becomes the medium for a small act of wealth redistribution. Yet, the story of the enormous Sicilian vessel also touches on several themes which are central to material culture studies: storage; the exceptional skills of a jar-maker; the mending of a pot; the (re)distribution of wealth; communal festivities and dining; and, finally, the economic, political and symbolic power of storage jars. It also reveals the intertwined lives of people and artefacts and the dynamics of a very powerful relationship, while also hinting at the many possibilities and stories which can lie behind a broken pot unearthed by archaeologists.

In effect, Pirandello could be taken to promote an integrated approach to ceramics. By embracing the art of storytelling and by incorporating it into traditional and modern archaeological methodologies, we can begin to understand a pot's life: from how it came into 'being' to how it was consumed, broken, mended and shattered once more. My study draws upon the story of *La Giara* in engaging with the cultural biographies of select ancient storage jars from the island of Crete. The aim is to offer an interdisciplinary series of ceramic analyses which investigate familiar and overlooked aspects of the long lives of pithoi and contextualize these vases to reveal a range of ways in which people interacted with them through time and space.

Like Pirandello in *La Giara*, material culture theorists have long concluded that the ways in which relationships between and people and objects are formed are not always linear or one-dimensional. Rather, bonds can be complicated and often times unpredictable, varying from person to person, from culture to culture and from era to era. To trace these intricacies embedded in archaeological material becomes even more challenging when we realize that different levels of interaction can coexist within the same timeframe and within a single community of people. In addition, once unearthed, objects of a distant past re-establish relationships with present agents, thereby acquiring a fresh meaning and a value which transcends time. Such sorts of intricate relationships are especially profound in the case of objects which have extended life-cycles such as pithoi, for they encompass many dimensions and they

express a variety of themes which can unfold at multiple levels. At first sight, these themes seem to be heterogeneous. But when we examine them more systematically we begin to discern the threads which tie them together. A case in point is indicated by the photograph on the cover of this thesis which shows a 1960s postcard issued by the National Tourist Organization of Greece to advertise tourism in Crete. It shows a Minoan pithos at the palace of Malia on the foreground and a young couple of visitors posing next to another large pithos at the back. The caption in the postcard gives voice to the voiceless pithos on the front, who calls for travellers to '*Visit Crete, Her Minoan past is your memorable future'*. This potential of pithoi to compress and to distort time and space is discussed in the second part of this thesis, but it is a theme which frequently emerges throughout this work.

Acknowledging storage jars as a shining example of the objects' ability to possess agency that is acquired during their life-cycles, this thesis marshals insights from our gowning understanding on the cultural biographies of objects to promote inquiries on the cultural biographies of Cretan pithoi and to explore the possibilities and the ways in which things continuously interact with humans: from the operational chains involved in their making and their art-historical and socio-political contexts, to the social relations and the historical contexts involved in their post-depositional lives during modernity.

This study runs the gamut from pottery production and distribution, to consumption, reuse and reclamation, with each main Chapter dedicated to specific episodes in the life-cycles of Cretan pithoi. More specifically, I have structured the thesis as follows:

Chapter 1 is a review of traditional, art-historical, ethnoarchaeological and integrated studies on Greek storage jars. This is followed by an assessment of past and current studies on ancient economics which have shaped and continue to dominate the ways we understand surplus and storage as a socio-economic act. The concluding part of the chapter lays out the theoretical backbone of this thesis, one born out of the integration of traditional and novel approaches to pithoi and storage with the cultural biography and the agency of objects.

Literature presented in Chapter 1 informs the selection and the interpretation of the individual case-studies treated in the rest of the chapters which are conventionally divided into two parts: Part I: '*From antiquity...'* and Part II: '*...to Postmodernity*'. Because certain attributes of ancient and modern Cretan pithoi merge

across time and space, this division does not always express absolute chronological or sequential transitions. Rather, this is more of a conceptual division that also presents episodes in the life-stages of pithoi in a chronological fashion.

In *'Part I: From antiquity...'*, I examine the life-cycle of Cretan EIA and Archaic pithoi from the initial period of their production and use to their consumption and reuse in later times, up until the Hellenistic and the Roman period. Specifically, in Chapter 2, I survey the plethora of ethnoarchaeological evidence which dominates discussions on pithos production and distribution and I proceed to test and assess this evidence through a science-based methodology (ceramic petrographic analysis) of some select samples from central Crete (Knossos, Aphrati, Lyktos and Prinias).

In Chapter 3, I draw upon cross-cultural, regional and site-specific literature that has long connected the rise of socio-political complexity with storage spaces and storage jars in order to trace elements of rising urbanism in Crete during the EIA-Archaic period. I focus on available excavation and survey evidence with pithoi collected from major sites in Crete such as Phaistos, Prinias, Aphrati and Azoria, and I analyze elements of pithos consumption and storerooms as indexes of social complexity from the 8th to the early 5th c. BC.

Chapter 4 is aimed at investigating other, non-primary uses of Geometric-Archaic Cretan pithoi and to elaborate on past proposals for their special, symbolic place in the collective consciousness of ancient Cretan communities. More specifically, I address the issue of inscriptions on pithoi by reviewing such specimens from Crete and beyond and I explore their symbolic and socio-political aspects. I then survey cases of the reuse of Geometric-early Classical Cretan pithoi in later contexts to hypothesise about their appreciation as valuable heirlooms, items intrinsically tied to generations of families and households.

In the second part of this study, *Part II: '...to Postmodernity'*, I contextualize and assess secondary uses of ancient Cretan pithoi in the early modern and modern period. Chapter 5 explores the post-deposition lives of Minoan pithoi excavated by Minos Kalokairinos at Knossos in the end of the 19th c. This episode in the biography of pithoi is used as a case-study to explore the powerful influence these vessels exerted on the early modern culture and archaeological literature. It is also used as a means to inspect how the treatment of pithoi, envisaged as works of an uninterrupted ceramic craft, has facilitated their use as instruments of local, national, and European-wide political agendas.

Chapter 6 draws from theories on the reclamation and itineraries of objects in order to reveal aspects of the agency of Cretan Archaic pithoi with relief decoration in modern culture of the 20th c. Particular attention is paid to the massive looting of Aphrati in central Crete in the 1960s. This is treated as a pivotal moment in the modern biographies of ancient storage jars that sparked off their itineraries to museums and private exhibitions across the globe. In addition to archaeological literature, I use original testimonies by art-collectors, museum curators and art-dealers as well as archived material of various sources like exhibition catalogues and auctions, as the means to discover the multi-levelled dynamics of pithoi in modern contexts and their concurrent yet different appreciation by various agents and cultures including Cretan, Greek and international collectors and archaeologists.

In the concluding part of this thesis, I return to the main theoretical framework to survey the fluctuating and occasionally contrasting meanings and symbolisms attributed to pithoi in various stages of their lives. I use conclusions drawn from the case-studies analyzed in the main body of this work to propose the adoption of a holistic approach in examining pithoi and coarse wares in particular, but also other archaeological objects boasting long craft tradition and life-cycles. The thesis closes with two appendices. Appendix I includes a table of all samples analysed for petrographic analysis; Appendix II is a table of looted Cretan Archaic pithoi, arranged by current location.