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Cultural biographies of Cretan storage jars (pithoi)

From antiquity to postmodernity

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CONCLUSION

This study sought to shed light on the complex cultural biographies of ancient Cretan pithoi from antiquity to post-modernity. Drawing from the conceptual agenda of *La Giara,* a story which encapsulates the multi-layered treatment of storage jars by various agents, my research employed interdisciplinary methods of ceramic analyses to elucidate phases in the long lives of Cretan storage jars. These methods include: a) traditional archaeological investigations of the production, consumption and distribution of ceramics, b) modern theoretical approaches on the cultural biographies and the agency of objects such as their reclamation and their itineraries, c) archaeometry and the application of thin-section petrography, and d) study of archival documents and conduct of interviews. These methods were integrated to produce a robust theoretical and methodological framework which allows one to appreciate artefacts with extremely complex cultural biographies, and to understand the ways in which individuals or groups of people, organizations and states, develop intricate and complex bonds with archaeological artefacts through time and space.

To fully consider the interactions between humans and things, it is essential that we study the links between artefacts and their original producers and consumers. This was the aim of Chapters 2 and 3 presented in the first part of this thesis. Chapter 2 sought to identify technological choices made and raw materials selected for the making of EIA-Archaic Cretan pithoi, as well as to examine evidence for their distribution. Ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological researches concerning pithos production and distribution were key to this study and they informed a set of questions for science-based, petrographic analysis of select pithos fragments from Knossos, Aphrati, Lyktos and Prinias. The analysis led to the characterization of four main pithos fabric groups and demonstrated the long-term use of a successful pithos-making recipe in a wide area within central Crete. These results provide safer analytical grounds for the characterization of the pottery from the selected sites and facilitate future research on coarse-ware production and distribution within and outside central Crete. My results also raised the possibility of itinerant pithos makers, thus enabling us to better evaluate the relationship between ethnography-ethnoarchaeology and archaeometry.

Chapter 3 investigated the relationship of Cretan Archaic storage jars with their contemporary human societies and traced how the consumption of these vessels

served to manifest identity and status. Specifically, the Chapter examined the morphology, the iconography, and the context of Cretan Archaic pithoi from some key-sites of central and east Crete, to suggest that these features served as a means to denote or to emphasize aspects of communal identity from the 8th to the early 5th c. BC. In doing so, pithoi and their immediate architectural environments emerged as proxies for complex socio-economic transformations which turned storage jars into artefacts related to individual and collective prosperity.

The extended social significance of pithos consumption and use were assessed further in Chapter 4. By considering scholarly proposals for the significance of inscribed media in general and inscribed pithoi in particular, the first part of the Chapter offered reflection on the materiality of inscribed vessels as monumental objects with agency relative to the meaning and the social effects of writing. Through an examination of inscribed pithoi from Crete and beyond, it became evident that Cretan storage jars were one of the earliest items on the island to carry writings in the Greek alphabet in ways which subtly, albeit meaningfully, expressed individual identity or even familial bonds in ancient Cretan societies. In the second part of the Chapter, I investigated the cases of reused EIA-Archaic pithoi which were found in later, mostly Hellenistic but also in Roman contexts. By providing a review of their archaeological contexts, I proposed that the reuse of pithoi is indicative of a strong connection between storage jars, Cretan households and their residents. This conclusion highlighted the powerful ability of storage vessels to dictate depositional behaviours but also to accumulate memories and to evoke acts of remembrance. It also led to the understanding of these utilitarian yet exceptionally durable pots as objects charged with a cumulative ancestral agency which adds to their heirloom-able value.

Observations and conclusions drawn in the first part of the thesis were brought together and further explored in the second part of this study. I drew upon the repeated entanglement of Cretan pithoi in scholarly agendas and from attributes commonly ascribed to ancient and modern Cretan pithoi as elements which highlight the unique ability of storage jars to link Cretans to their ancestors and to express ideologies. These features, which are indicative of the continuous yet ever-changing meanings of the Cretan pithos, were contextualized in modern socio-cultural settings as a means to better define the multi-dimensional and powerful social role of these vessels though time.

Chapter 5 investigated aspects of the cultural biographies of ancient Cretan pithoi during the early modern period. More specifically, the chapter traced the post-depositional lives of some Minoan pithoi from Knossos after their excavation by the antiquarian, Minos Kalokairinos, at the end of the 19th c. AD. By contextualizing Kalokairinos' donations of some of these pithoi to different museums, I showed their role in local, national and international socio-political relationships. In this way, these pithoi emerged as instruments of political influence during extremely turbulent times in the history of Crete, Greece and Europe. At the same time, the pithoi promoted early interest in Knossos, which would eventually become one of the best researched sites in the Mediterranean. They also became interwoven with archaeological discussions concerning the role of storage, commensality and social structure in ancient Crete, which remain important for scholarship to the present day. Thus, Chapter 5 established the capacity of ancient objects to carry powerful meanings in modernity. This conclusion also promoted some reflection on the past and the current role of archaeologists during political and epistemological crises, and invited some consideration on the social role of archaeology as an instrument of modernity.

Chapter 6 examined the modern biographies of Archaic pithoi by focusing on their reclamations and itineraries after looting events which took place on Crete in the 1960s. By tracking the routes of illicitly excavated and exported pithoi, this chapter unravelled the widespread yet varied appreciation of these archaeological artefacts by looters, local and international collectors, museum curators, art-dealers, and archaeologists. Whether complete or in fragments, Archaic pithoi eventually became embedded in modern global and local academic and socio-cultural developments. More broadly, my analysis offered a more meaningful understanding of the social and behavioural arenas which link ancient objects to modern people.

As artefacts with a remarkable tradition and durability, Cretan pithoi emerge as one of the most fascinating types of pottery involved in the study of cultural biographies and the agency of things. By mapping a range of episodes of their lives, my work offered varied examples on the ways in which socio-economic and political developments such as urbanization, rising elites, nationalism, and globalization, ascribe different roles to ancient things. Furthermore, the case-studies examined here allowed us to better appreciate the stories and memories associated with an object and to conceptualize its potency to act as medium for evocation. By theorizing the travels of objects, the present work demonstrated how things can become relevant not only

because they are associated with an ancient site, a culture or an artistic movement, but also because of their mobility.

From this study, the Cretan pithos stands out as a cultural artefact which, despite its static role as a bulk and cumbersome container, manages to fall on a continuum that transcends time and strips away geographical barriers. Its form becomes an eclectic mix of superior craftsmanship, ancient and modern cultures, ideologies and politics. This unique quality of pithoi is best encapsulated in this 1960s postcard which I discussed in final chapter of this thesis and which features as the cover of my work: it is the pithos and the messages it conveys which invite people from all places to experience a present and a future through the past. The indexical capacity of this photograph and its title can hardly be surpassed. In the most eloquent way, this minimalistic imaging expresses the inseparable unity of pithoi with a shared Cretan indigeneity that is at once ancient and modern. Through this photographic and conceptual lens we can begin to navigate this continuum of time and space and we can visualize storage jars as objects with the remarkable role of binding together ancient and modern generations of people.

These conclusions demonstrate that the study of the cultural biographies of objects has the capacity to give voice to the voiceless and to reveal their context-related meaning and their astonishing aptitude to continuously absorb new meanings in new settings. This shows that there is no end or death in objects' biographies; instead, objects have the potential to pass silently through periods of stasis before becoming again embedded into new social, cultural and economic contexts.