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FOODSCAPES, PLANTS AND ECOFACTS IN BRONZE AGE GREECE*

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Managing the production, distribution, access and consumption of food plants and their by-products have been central themes in reconstructing Bronze Age (BA) economies and societies of the Aegean. Collection and reporting of plant remains from excavations and archaeobotany as a discipline, although usually at the margin of such debates, have contributed a wealth of primary data towards this direction. The BA is archaeobotanically one of the best-documented in Greece. A close investigation of the currently available publication record, however, highlights a number of lacunae that need to be addressed before embarking into interpretations.

Examination of the geographical coverage of the dataset demonstrates that this is not uniform, with most evidence originating from Crete, north Greece, and Argolid in Peloponnese. Similarly, there is currently a chronological bias towards the later phases of the BA period. Interrogating more in-depth the quality of the existing evidence the first observation is that the data from northern Greece are generally of better quality, including richer assemblages and more samples per site that allow for better spatial resolution. The vast majority of archaeobotanical assemblages have been collected without systematic sampling whereas spot finds still form a substantial bulk of the available information, particularly in southern Greece. Discussing the biases that the recovery methods of plant remains may impose, I argued the need of caution in associating plants with certain practices in the past.

Taking this into account and focusing on Crete I explored the distribution of plants across the social spectrum through time. All major food plants were present in all site types, with the exception of burial/ritual sites where an association with olive emerges. All types of food plants were accessed and consumed by both the elite and non-elite and diversification of such resources seems present since the very beginning, rather than at a later stage as a precondition for the emergence of palatial societies. Diverse plant resources were also present in northern Greece where, however, a different range of species seems to predominate. The observed variety in food plants, flavours and even colours across the BA foodscape highlights potentially different socio-cultural traditions and connectivity networks for their introduction and dispersal (for a review see Livarda forthcoming[†]).

In the case of burials in BA Crete, closer inspection of the archaeobotanical remains suggested that these were spot finds providing a very skewed picture of past ritual practices. Turning to the whole dataset, it seems that when controlled archaeobotanical sampling is conducted then a wider range of cereals, legumes and fruits are involved in burial practices. This reflects usage of the local produce in at least some of the BA rituals connecting the worlds of the living and the dead. Turning to another subject of debate, briefly assessing the validity of the plant related evidence for the intensive cultivation of olive, I maintained that, although its presence in

* Part of this talk is based on Livarda, A. and Kotzamani, G. 2014. The archaeobotany of Neolithic and Bronze Age Crete: synthesis and prospects. *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 108: 1-29.

[†] Livarda, A. (forthcoming 2015) Archaeobotany in Greece. *Archaeological Reports*.

southern BA Greece is undeniable, the scale of its exploitation and early intensive management cannot be confirmed.

I argued that in fact the persistent focus on olive and vine in current debates is still influenced by modern perceptions of the landscape. Employing the case study of the re-examination of the olive 'necklace' recovered at the tomb at Kazarma, Peloponnese back in the 1960s (Livarda and Keramidas in preparation), I examined how both the local people and the modern cultural landscapes enter into archaeological discourses, shaping and driving research questions. I suggested that changing our research questions towards contextualisation of the archaeobotanical evidence of food plants within their landscape will permit acknowledging and unfolding the regional variability of production systems and economic practices. I outlined the first results of such an approach at the new excavations at Palaikastro in Crete, where systematic archaeobotanical sampling, landscape survey and geoarchaeological coring seem to delineate a picture of a largely pastoral landscape where cultivation strived to make the most out of an increasingly unsustainable environment.

I concluded that the current archaeobotanical dataset needs to be read critically while new integrated and multidisciplinary approaches to past land management hold the key for a solid re-assessment of past societies and economies.