

Archaeology of Mediterranean Cuisine: Cooking traditions from the 2nd millennium BC in the Aegean

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Introduction

The primary objective of my postdoctoral research, conducted under the auspices of the 2024–2025 CHS Fellowship, is to deepen our understanding of Minoan cooking traditions and to reconstruct the sociocultural dimensions of cooking practices on Crete during the second millennium BC. This period is particularly significant, as it marks the prominent role of the Minoans in the Aegean and may illuminate the roots of Mediterranean cuisine in the prehistoric era. This research is grounded in the framework of the social archaeology of food, which underscores the critical role of food consumption in shaping societies (Goody 1982; Dietler & Hayden 2001; Hastorf 2017). It also builds upon recent archaeological studies emphasizing the significance not only of food but also of cooking practices in the development of sociocultural identities and the negotiation of status and power (Villing & Spataro 2015; Trusty & Hruby 2017). Through the analysis of ceramic vessels—particularly cooking wares—their use patterns, contextual associations, and the composition of cooking sets, along with the identification of the foodstuffs prepared, this study

seeks to provide new insights into culinary sequences associated with Minoan cooking events. The broader aim is to investigate culinary processes within both domestic and communal settings, using archaeological data in conjunction with anthropological approaches to ancient food consumption.

State of the art and new questions

The study of cooking practices and cooking vessels has only recently gained attention in Aegean prehistory. Scholars have increasingly recognized its value in elucidating pottery traditions, technological specialization, and the types of food prepared (Borgna 2004; Rutter 2004; Alberti 2016; Morrison 2017). Nevertheless, integrated approaches that combine the study of ceramic cooking wares with contextual data remain rare, limiting our comprehension of culinary sequences—specifically, the composition of cooking sets and the functional use of different vessel types. This lack of integration hinders the identification of cooking traditions and their geographical and chronological distributions across Crete. Moreover, the sociopolitical and cultural dimensions of cooking and cuisine have rarely been

explored in Minoan contexts (Borgna 2004; Rutter 2004; Isaakidou 2007; Hruby 2017). While Mycenaean contexts have benefited from comparative and interdisciplinary approaches (Hruby 2008, 2017; Lis 2008, 2015), such methodologies are largely absent from the study of Minoan cooking traditions. This lack creates a gap in our understanding of sociopolitical developments and the negotiation of power diachronically during the Bronze Age in Minoan contexts, as these can be perceived through the cooking of food.

To address this gap, I applied an integrated and interdisciplinary methodology—including morpho-technological analysis, use-wear studies, residue analysis, and contextual interpretation—on selected cooking vessels from the Bronze Age sites of Sissi and Malia. This approach revealed significant shared and distinctive features in their respective cooking traditions. [1] Notably, it identified varied uses of cooking vessels in relation to heat sources, diverse cooking techniques, and the preparation of novel foodstuffs such as cumin, tiger nuts, and root vegetables, findings that shed new light on the culinary history of northeastern Crete.

The CHS Fellowship enabled the continuation and expansion of this integrated approach, allowing for the examination of Minoan cooking

practices and cooking vessels from new archaeological contexts and key case study sites in north-central and east Crete. This research aims to further uncover aspects of Minoan cuisine and contribute to our understanding of the social, political, and economic structures of Bronze Age Aegean societies.

Materials and Methods

During the CHS Fellowship, I studied new cooking assemblages from the Sissi settlement, a significant Minoan site, where well-defined archaeological contexts of residential and public functions have been revealed, shedding new light on different aspects of the public, ritual, and domestic life of Minoans (Driessen 2018). My research incorporated firsthand analysis of ceramic cooking vessels, as well as published cooking assemblages from Sissi and the neighboring site of Malia—a palace center with significant administrative and political functions that provides an excellent comparative framework (Chapouthier & Charbonneaux 1928; Devolder 2023; Langhor et al. 2023).

The multi-scalar methodology employed—encompassing morpho-technological and use-wear analysis along with spatio-temporal

contextualization—yields new interpretive possibilities for understanding prehistoric culinary sequences. The analysis of previously unpublished material and the re-examination of earlier excavated cooking vessels using updated methods have facilitated the identification of new patterns in cooking practices.

Access to Harvard University's digital library resources proved highly beneficial, enabling extensive literature review not only in prehistoric Aegean studies, but also in comparative research from Classical and Late Antiquity, anthropological perspectives, and global ethnoarchaeological studies. This broadened the analytical framework of the project significantly.

Discussion

The study focused on cooking vessels from the Postpalatial (ca. 1360–1200 BC), Late Minoan IIIB period, multi-roomed Building CD at Sissi, excavated since 2007 by Jan Driessen (UCLouvain) under the auspices of the Belgian School at Athens. In collaboration with Dr. Charlotte Langohr, ceramic specialist for the site, we examined new archaeological contexts, generating promising results. The study and final publication of the Building CD are ongoing; however a few

preliminary results can be discussed. The new archaeological data and the information from published cooking assemblages that were gathered made it possible to define the cooking sets and processes, and to identify patterns in vessel use, as well as their geographical and chronological distribution.

Some preliminary results regard the most common type of Minoan cooking sets, the tripod cooking pot—a jar-like vessel with three cylindrical legs attached to a flat base and two horizontal handles (Fig.1a)—a type with a long existence in Minoan cooking sets from the Prepalatial to the Postpalatial period (2900–1200 BC).

During the Postpalatial period the tripod cooking pot has a high and everted rim, wide or narrow openings, a rounded profile, an intense globular body, and a wide flat base (Fig.1b), exhibiting a high degree of typological standardization and large volumetric capacity (ca. 40 Liters).

Such uniformity suggests standardization in vessel function in the cooking process, performing wet cooking methods, such as boiling and stewing, potentially indicating regularized cooking practices within the building. However, the use-wear analysis and the identified patterns of soot deposits (Fig.1c) reveal variation in how

these pots were used and how the wet cooking method was performed. This different use is particularly related to the cooking temperature, which can vary from high to low, and to the cooking techniques, which can vary in terms of proximity to the heat source, ranging from far away to close by.

The large size of these pots and their high volumetric capacity are notable compared to tripod cooking pots of previous periods, of medium or small size and of volumetric capacity ca. 25L. [2] This suggests increased food production, likely reflecting growing communal demands and evolving social structures during the Postpalatial phase. Similar trends have been observed in elite contexts on the Mycenaean mainland during the Late Helladic IIIC period (Lis 2015), pointing to potential parallels in feasting or communal integration activities and hinting at Building CD's possible public function.

Of particular note is the introduction of a new tripod cooking pot shape with a prominent rounded base and S-shaped profile (Fig. 1d), which contrasts with the long-standing Minoan typology. This form has parallels on the mainland (Langohr 2022) and may represent a significant break in the Minoan ceramic repertoire, whose influences

from the Mycenaean mainland can be observed broadly on the island and in Sissi (Borgna 1997; Langohr 2022). As the tripod pot was generally resistant to change, this innovation suggests a broader transformation in cooking practices and social dynamics.

These preliminary findings underscore how a multi-level methodological approach can reveal significant aspects of culinary traditions, possibly linked to broader social and political negotiations. Continued analysis and contextual integration will clarify the extent and nature of these interactions across the island and may further illuminate socio-cultural exchange, power dynamics, and Minoan influence within the Aegean.

Dissemination of the research

Throughout 2024–2025 as CHS Fellow, I actively disseminated the project's progress and results across various academic platforms. I presented at the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) Annual Meeting 2024, where I co-organized a session and delivered two papers. [3] A lecture focusing on Minoan cooking vessels and volumetric analysis was given at a conference organized by the École

Française d'Athènes (EFA), leading to the submission of a paper to a peer-reviewed journal. [4]

Additionally, I presented my research at the INSTAP Study Center for East Crete as part of its established lecture series, which provided valuable discussion with experts in Minoan and Aegean archaeology. A lecture titled “Crete and Ancient Food: Past and Present” at the International Summer School in Classics, University of Crete, offered an enriching opportunity to engage with students in Classics, fostering dialogue on Minoan prehistory and the early roots of Mediterranean cuisine.

The newly renovated museum at the Malia archaeological site, managed by the French School at Athens, featured a poster presentation of my work, focusing on cooking practices in Minoan contexts. This allowed for engagement with a broader, non-specialist audience.

In December 2024, a co-edited volume of the ScapeCon 2022 conference was published in the Aegis Series (UCLouvain), including a paper directly related to my research on cooking vessels and Minoan kitchens. Finally, during my stay at the CHS in Washington, D.C., I presented and discussed my work with fellow CHS researchers. These

discussions provided valuable feedback on both my findings and the methodological challenges encountered in preparing my doctoral thesis for publication.



Figure 1. Tripod cooking pots from: a) Neopalatial Sissi; b) Postpalatial Sissi; b) soot deposits e.g. use marks that formed from on the external vessel's surface from the heat and high temperature cooking during the cooking process; d) Postpalatial Sissi the new type of tripod cooking pot.

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Footnotes

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