PREHISTORY

Soulana Maria Valamoti, *Plant foods of Greece. A culinary journey to the Neolithic and Bronze Ages*. pp. 504, 123 colour, 32 B/W ills, 3 maps. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-0-8173-2159-8, hardcover $49.95.

This is a truly exceptional book: although based on the most rigorous scientific research, it reads like the best fiction or travel book and leads the reader from surprise to surprise. It is also written in a very literary, sometimes poetic styles, which constantly betrays not only the love of the author for plants, but even more for human beings, whether long dead or well-alive. The book has also been well served by the publisher, with an elegant layout, numerous colour pictures and a detailed index.

Let us start by saying that the title does not justice to the content of the book: its scope and interest go far beyond foodstuff and cooking, as Valamoti addresses many other ingredients such as spices, healing plants, psychotropic and hallucinogenic substances, oil-producing plants and alcoholic beverages. And she turns to many other topics than the consumption of plants (whichever way), in particular the movement of people, the movement of ideas, feasting and rituals, funerary offerings, to name but a few.

Valamoti, although a renown archaeobotanist, is indeed not interested in lists of carbonized seeds. What she is interested in are the "stories" told by the more than 120 genera and species of wild and domesticated plants, what they can tell us about the interactions between humans and plants, the various ways they were stored, processed and cooked according to local traditions. She views the "humble" carbonised seeds and fruits as "leftovers of human relationships, senses and thought, expression of feeling, elements of their memory" (p. 6). This necessarily entails some speculative discussions, but Valamoti always takes care to clearly draw the limit between what is known and what is debatable, between what the data can tell and what derives from her own perceptions.

To reach these ambitious goals, she aptly intertwines a wide array of evidence: the archaeobotanical remains of unprocessed and processed plant food of course, but also chemical analyses of the ceramic containers, grinding tools, pounders, cooking facilities, pottery typology, Classical texts, numerous ethnographic observations and interviews in Greece and elsewhere, and the experiments in processing plants she has for long conducted with her students.

The plan of the book clearly follows her main line of enquiry, from the raw material to its processing and transformation as food, alcohol or medicine and the cultural traditions they reveal. The first chapter, entitled "The dawn of a new culinary landscape" addresses the introduction of domestic cereals and pulses in Greece from the Near East. The second and third deal with cereal foods and pulses. The use of oil-bearing plants in "prehistoric cuisines of Greece" is discussed in the fourth, the collecting of wild fruit and nuts in the fifth. The following two chapters are devoted to alcoholic drinks and medicinal and hallucinogenic plants, the latter being inevitably more speculative as many plants can be used both as food and medicine. Chapter 8 synthesizes numerous observations on storage, processing and cooking the plants, both for daily domestic meals and collective feasting or rituals. This leads to what is in a sense the climax of the book and what drove the whole argumentation: "Plant foods and identity in Prehistoric Greece". It is nevertheless followed by two other chapters. Chapter 10 is a personal and lively narration of Valamoti's struggle to establish archaeobotany as a mainstream scientific and academic discipline, and her constant concern to share her findings with the public through lectures, festivals, interviews and films. Finally, as an "entremet" before the copious, useful, but not easily digestible lists of plant remains from the 126 sites analyzed, Chapter 11 presents us with a few Prehistoric recipes that can be reproduced at home, at least in Greece where its ingredients are available!

As it is clearly impossible to mention all the interesting discoveries one makes when reading such a rich book, I shall arbitrarily select a few topics that especially struck me. The first is the destruction of the myth of the "traditional Mediterranean diet" supposedly based on bread, wine and olive oil. Not only are pulses just as important as cereals in Prehistoric (and Historic) diets, but olive oil appears to be a comparatively late introduction, first in eastern Crete—probably under the influence of the Levant—and in the Peloponnese in the Bronze Age. The olive is absent from northern Greece, and even in southern Greece, Linear B tablets indicate that it was a luxurious product reserved to the elite, not the basic ingredient of a peasant's meal. Wine also is considered in the written texts as a luxury, reserved

for feasting and rituals. I find this surprising. Valamoti indeed identified the production of wine in a large jar (estimated to hold 130 liters) found in a burnt house at Late Neolithic Dikili Tash. This suggests that the production of wine from wild vines may have been an independent innovation in northern Greece. But the recipe, as shown by this exceptional find, is simple: pressed fruits, pips and juice together will initiate fermentation through the yeast present in the skin. Why thus would wine remain a luxury? Possibly because it remained for long collected from wild vines, since there is no reliable way to tell apart wild and cultivated vines from the morphology of the pips. It was, nevertheless, the main alcoholic beverage in Prehistoric Greece. As someone familiar with beer, I was surprised to realize that beer brewing was so rare in Prehistoric Greece, limited to a few Bronze Age sites in northern Greece. Valamoti raises the possibility that beer drinking and wine drinking groups may have been different, and of different origins, maintaining different traditions.

A second important theme is the recurrent contrast between Neolithic and Bronze Age practices. The Bronze Age plant repertory confirms a high degree of inter-connectivity and witnesses the introduction, for food or fodder, of a large range of new cultivars, introduced from the West, from Central Europe and from the East, sometimes from very far away, such as Celtic bean, Spanish vetchling, Cyprus vetch, opium poppy, mustard, gold of pleasure, and many others. Most striking in this respect are millet, originating from Central Asia and possibly introduced from China along a "silk road", and *Lallemantia*, also from Central Asia, which bears fruit rich in oil and can be used as a medicinal plant. Valamoti notes that the earliest finds of millet are from Thasos (Skala Sotiros), where circum-Pontic influences are perceptible, and suggests it was brought through inhabitants of the Caspian steppes, while *Lallemantia* appears at the same time as tin-bronze, also of north-eastern origin.

The hypothesis that these plants would have been introduced by foreigners that settled in Greece, remained there, and kept their traditional meals and recipes, is in line with the main argument of the book. From the very beginning of her story, i.e., in the Early Neolithic, Valamoti insists on the unequal geographic distribution of the different wheat species. In Northern Greece, *Triticum timopheevii*, until recently known as the "new glume wheat" predominates in some sites, einkorn in others, despite the time-consuming work necessary to process these glume wheats. Conversely, emmer and the bread wheats, free-threshing wheats, predominate in southern Greece. As she considers that the various preferences in wheat species were probably unrelated to environmental conditions, she suggests that they were related to the different origins of these first farmers and constitute identity markers. Similar preferences, as well as interaction with the local hunter-gatherers may explain why the various "Neolithic packages" introduced from the Near East were consciously modified: chickpea and Celtic bean are virtually absent in the Neolithic. Conversely, grass pea is rare in the Near and Middle East but very common in Greece and Bulgaria: it may have been locally domesticated.

Marked local preferences continue in the Bronze Age, and concern not only the plant species, but also how they were processed and the cooking equipment or the pots used for the different foodstuffs. For instance, large concentrations of almonds are found only in southern Greece, whereas concentrations of acorns are more characteristic of northern Greece, Cornelian cherries are only eaten in northern Greece, there is no lining of the hearths with pebbles or sherds in Crete, alcoholic drinks were consumed in northern Greece already by the Neolithic but only appear in the Bronze Age in southern Greece, etc. Consequently, the picture of Neolithic and Bronze Age Greece provided by this "journey" is that of an increasingly diversified country, increasingly connected with close and far-off countries, and peopled by increasing diversified cultural and social groups. That these insights could be gained solely by the study of plant foods (*senso latu*) is a remarkable achievement. It is undoubtedly the best demonstration that archaeobotany, as viewed and practiced by Valamoti, is indeed a most powerful entry into past cultural traditions as these are expressed in enduring culinary traditions.

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David Michael Smith, William G. Cavanagh and Angelos Papadopoulos, *The Wider Island of Pelops. Studies in Prehistoric Aegean Pottery in Honour of Professor Christopher Mee*. pp. 278, 146 colour and b/w ills, 5 tables (pb). Oxford: Archaeopress, 2019. ISBN 978-1-80327-328-0, paperback £50.