CHAPTER 2

FORAGING IN THE AEGEAN FROM THE PALAEOLITHIC TO THE PRESENT

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Abstract

Looking for alternative approaches to the Paleolithic past, and the foraging lifestyle (Binford, 1978), it is attempted to record the practices of modern foragers and compare them with organic finds in Mediterranean archaeological sites. The collection of snails, salt, herbs and seafood is one of the traditional practices of the Greek countryside and may have been foods collected by prehistoric foragers.

Introduction

HISTORY OF PALAEOLITHIC RESEARCH IN GREECE

The archaeology of the early Stone Age in Greece has a clearly shorter history than the corresponding research in Africa and Eurasia. The earliest finds assigned to the Mesolithic date back to the 1930s as part of Markovits' speleological research (Markovits, 1932; Galanidou, 2003), and the first systematic Palaeolithic and Mesolithic research programs in the 1960s and 1980s were led by British and American archaeologists in caves and open-air sites in Epirus and the Franchthi cave in the Peloponnese and formed the starting point for a whole generation of archaeologists to deal with the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic period. Early prehistory research has since been steadily developing over the last decades, with reference points being the publication of the conference proceedings on the Palaeolithic Archaeology in Greece and neighboring areas (Bailey et al., 1999) and the publication of the round table meeting on the Greek Mesolithic (Galanidou and Perlès, 2003). Since then, several terrestrial and

underwater investigations have revealed new aspects of early prehistory and raised multidimensional research questions about the habitation and movements during the Pleistocene and early Holocene era in the wider Greek area (e.g., Ammerman et al., 2011; Sakellariou and Galanidou, 2016; Efstratiou et al., 2022; Biagi et al., 2023). Research on food gathering in Greece in early prehistory is an important part of archaeological research (e.g., Efstratiou and Kyriakou, 2011, Galanidou, 2000; 2009; Starkovich, 2014, Elefanti and Marshall, 2018). However, few publications about Greek prehistory specialize exclusively in foraging practices. Usually, food gathering is inextricably linked to hunting or fishing (Mourtzopoulou, 2004), as a general survival strategy of populations without a permanent settlement (Christoforidis, 2006) or rather the transition to a productive economy is the main focus, as is the case in the thorough archaeobotanical study on the domestication of plants from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic in caves (Kotzamani, 2010).

HISTORY OF ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN GREECE

Ethnoarchaeological research in Greece began at the onset of the 20th century with the recording of ethnographic data with the aim of interpreting archaeological objects, structures, or processes and saw development during the 1960s and 1970s when the framework for ethnoarchaeology in Greece was defined. Some of the most important investigations of this period took place in Messenia, Milos, Argolis, Corfu, Tzia, Grevena, and Rhodope, most of which focused on parallels with Bronze and Iron Age archaeology (for an extensive record of the ethnoarchaeological research in Greece up to 2000 see Efstratiou, 2002; 43-64). Stone Age archaeology and ethnoarchaeology have 'met' directly or indirectly on several occasions, either by using the research tools of ethnography to interpret certain aspects of closed archaeological assemblages such as caves (Galanidou, 1997; 1998; 2000) or by conducting ethnographic research alongside archaeological research programs (Jacobsen, 1984; Van Andel and Runnels, 1987; Efstratiou, 2007).

Methodology

The object of this research is the ethnoarchaeological and ethnohistorical study of foraging

practices in the Aegean. Starting from the literature review on the archaeological finds of salt, wild edible plants, terrestrial mollusks and coastal crustaceans, it covers the contemporary foraging activity in terrestrial and coastal areas using the techniques of qualitative research (open-ended interviews instead of questionnaires, emphasis on participatory observation, and focus on the biographies of the research subjects, see Pourkos and Dafermos, 2010; 31-35) for the collection and analysis of the data. Field research is conducted in rural areas where there is a stronger connection to rural life, but also in peri-urban and urban environments to make comparisons and to look for ways in which foraging practices survive or revive. At the same time, historical sources and folklore testimonies describing such foraging activities during the 19th and 20th centuries are studied.

Results

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR FORAGING PRACTICES

Salt, edible plants, herbs and shellfish have been dietary staples, possibly remedies, or used for food preservation in the prehistoric societies of the Mediterranean basin for many thousands of years (Miracle, 2002). Some of these finds are more common in the archaeological record due to their preservation in acidic environments, while others are quite rare. Throughout the Mediterranean, a number of sites have been found with traces of consumption of terrestrial mollusks (mainly *Helix lucorum, Helix pomatia* and *Helix aspersa*) during the late Pleistocene and early Holocene (Lubell, 2004). The shells of terrestrial mollusks and oysters are the most durable organic remains due to their hard and compact shell, which saves them from the acidity of the soil while they are buried and protects them from shattering and breaking. In several cases, land and sea snail shells can be revealed in archaeological layers intact or without serious alterations and changes (Mourtzopoulou, 2004; 8). These finds are studied as a possible indicator of the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic era, as in some cases, they ceased to be a significant part of the diet of people after the beginning of the Neolithic, and are considered as a possible indication of increased resource exploitation during the Late Paleolithic and early Mesolithic (Lubell, 2004). It is argued that land snails were being farmed in prehistoric times and date their "domestication" to the Mesolithic (Bahn, 1983;

Fernández-Armesto, 2002; Lubell, 2004; 78). Salt has historically been equally important, as apart from being a taste supplement, it was also necessary for food preservation (Alexianu et al., 2008). Direct evidence for the collection and use of salt in prehistory is attested in Zakros, where a significant amount of salt was collected dating to the Minoan Bronze Age (Kopaka and Chaniotakis, 2003) and indirect evidence for the use of salt as a preservative was suggested in the Mesolithic Youra Cave (Sampson, 2006). Recently, salt has been proposed as a good reason for foragers based on the mainland to voyage out to Cyprus in the summer months (Ammerman 2020, 431). The archaeological finds for the collection and consumption of wild edible plants during antiquity are clearly less, but through archaeobotanical research, we have evidence, mainly dating to the Neolithic in open-air sites (Tsartsidou, 2009), and caves (Kotzamani, 2010) in Greece.

THE ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS

Through ethnoarchaeological research, differences in the use of space have been observed between groups of foragers who focus on the collection of herbs and edible grasses, with corresponding groups who focus on the collection of gastropods and shellfish, such as snails, barnacles, and seashells. A greater care is observed in the shaping of the space by the groups of horticulturalists, possibly related to the more permanent establishment that results from this practice (Galanidou, 2000; 271).

Field ethnoarchaeological research and archival research have provided interesting insights into relevant foraging practices. Snail collectors (*chochlidologoi* or *mazeftes*) used to be mainly women and children, while today almost all age groups are represented, collecting snails mainly after rainfall (*protovrexia*). Often, however, the collection is also carried out in the summer months, collecting snails (*chochlious* as they are called in Crete, from the ancient Greek *kochlias*, which is another indication of the timelessness of the practice in Crete) hidden under stones or rocks. The seasonality of the collection is accompanied by a good knowledge of the annual cycle of the species (plant and animal), the special conditions for their collection, and the awareness of the need to protect them during the reproductive period. Also, depending on the season of collection and the species, the storage and food preparation process is modified (e.g., *boubouristoi chochlioi*, the budded snails, are considered a summer delicacy; the *tsigaristochorta,* wild edible plants suitable for sizzling in a pot, a winter food).

Figure 1 Land snails foraging (*Helix aspersa*) in Athanasiana, Kissamos, 2004 (P. Zervoudakis)

The special vocabulary of the foods that are collected testifies to the specialization of the practices. Various snail species are called *chrondrochochlioi* meaning fat snails (*Helix aspersa, lucorum, pomatia*), *lianochochlioi* meaning thin snails (*Eobania verniculata*), *liparoudia* or *chochlidakia* meaning small snails (*Littorina littorea*), *papitses, papadulas* and many other names depending on the region. Wild edible plants also have a number of names, often different for the same species (e.g. *lagoudochorto*, rabbit grass, or *melissochorto*, bee grass, for *Prasium majus*). The broad categorization of wild edible plants by *chortarades* (wild plant foragers) is done according to their suitability for a specific way of cooking: *vrastochorta* (wild edible plants to be boiled) and *tsigarochorta* (wild edible plants to be sizzled). Wild edible plants and herbs are of such importance for foragers that often, the great majority of place names in Greek provinces are phytonymic and often associated with wild species (Makrakis, 2014; 365-378).

Figure 2 Left: Foraging *Prasium majus 'lagoudochorto'* (Greek: rabbit herb). Right: Foraging *Sinapis 'vlastakia vrouvas'* (Greek: sprouts). Kissamos province. February 2021 (P. Zervoudakis)

Salt collection is not described in such rich vocabulary, but the processes vary considerably locally. The pure salt from Gramvoussa, sought after throughout the island and today known outside the island, was for centuries a source of livelihood for the locals. *Alatsi* (salt) is collected from the steep rocks, even through caves. After a storm, the cavities in the rocks are filled with seawater and when it gets hot, the locals know that in two days, it will have enough salt. These rocks and caves are still approached today by boats. A few decades ago, many locals used to go to Gramvoussa to collect salt with donkeys, organized in small groups that camped for a few days on the deserted cape. Collectors' strong preference and ties to specific locations go far beyond notions of land ownership or origin and often connect collectors to distant or even unknown destinations, which nevertheless become reference points for individuals or groups.

Figure 3 Left: Salt collection from coastal rock cavities. Right: 'Early' salt from the Gramvoussa cape, July 2021 (N. Paterakis.)

Narratives often link the collection of snails and grasses to conditions of poverty, which forced the expansion of the diet or the intensification of foraging. Wild edible plants were consumed in large quantities to create a feeling of satiety (the modern Greek verb for satiate is *chortaínō* which shares the same root with *chorta*, edible plants) while *chochlioi* (land snails) might even be consumed as breakfast (Zografakis, 2008; 41-42). Snails, salt and wild edible plants became objects of trade, sometimes of exchange, and

especially for women in the 1950s and 1960s, an aid to livelihood as well as a way out of the domestic space to the market of the village, the nearest town, or even the city. The collection of snails and their trade peaked in the 1970s (Makrakis, 2014; 446) and in recent decades, their cultivation has grown significantly, to the detriment of their traditional foraging. The commercialization and over-exploitation of the available food for collection are echoed in most modern foragers' comments, which attribute their decline to environmental factors and social changes (e.g., an influx of immigrants). Population movements have also been associated in the past with changes in the intensity of gathering specific foods. A typical example was the 3500 Turkish Rethymnians who fled to Asia Minor in 1925 and caused the Turkish newspapers to write articles describing how they "were eating the food of donkeys" because they were gathering all the wild grasses, according to an anecdotal story by Mustafa Papyrakis (Stratidakis, 2018; 107).

Discussion

Ethnographic research of hunter-gatherer populations for more than a century has focused on populations that have not partially or fully adopted the Western way of life in South America, Africa, and Oceania in environments such as tropical rainforests, steppes, and savannas. The preference for studying foraging practices in 'exotic' locations continues to this day and is reflected in numerous publications (e.g., Lane, 2014; Yu, 2015), leaving out of the discussion about modern foraging Europe and the Mediterranean. An interesting anthropological study focused on field research in Athenian communes on the notions of collaborative society and immediate return economy. This research compared urban communes to foraging societies and innovated by exemplifying a set of research subjects from the urban present, but ultimately did not avoid the comparison with 'exotic' forager populations such as the Hadza and Yolgnu (Hatzidiakou, 2005). In addition to archaeological observations and their comparison with ethnographic data, the research of foraging in the Aegean aims to capture the stories of people who have not been 'heard' by society and have not been 'written' in the history of the formation of the modern Greek world. In addition, it formulates the opinion that food gathering is not an earlier stage of humanity that was once abandoned, as suggested by

the theories of social evolutionism (Tylor, 1869; Karavasileiou, 2017; 12), but a practice that survives with different conditions in many societies.

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