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Ancient Cookware from the Levant: An Ethnoarchaeological Perspective

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BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Cookware from the Levant: An Ethnoarchaeological Perspective, by Gloria London, Sheffield, England: Equinox Publishing, 2016, pp. 328, US\$150, ISBN 978-1-7817-9199-8 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-7817-9385-5 (digital)

Ancient Cookware from the Levant is an extraordinary volume that brings together decades of ground-breaking research by one of ethnoarchaeology's most notable and accomplished ceramic experts. Cookware has often been relegated to the sidelines of archaeological ceramics investigation while 'prettier' ceramics with painted and polished surfaces garnered most of the attention. Today, as increasingly sensitive archaeometric techniques are now revealing food residues, clay fabric technology, and firing temperatures, it is more important than ever for archaeologists to understand how ancient cookwares were made and used. While the significance of this volume to the study of pyrotechnology, craft production, and foodways is tremendous, the groundwork is also laid for connecting these subfields to larger socioeconomic, cultural, and political research questions.

The volume includes detailed ethnographic and archaeological coverage of the Levant, primarily of the southern Levant (ancient Canaan), and Cyprus as well as comparisons from neighboring areas and around the world. The volume takes the time to introduce the reader to the landscape and geology of these regions, and to all aspects of ceramic cookware (both modern and ancient), assuming no prior knowledge. Those working in adjacent regions such as the Syrian Orontes Valley, Transjordan, Arabia, and Egypt will be particularly excited to have archaeological comparisons and ethnography together in one volume. Due note is made of the foundational literature of ethnoarchaeology and the caveats of using ethnographic analogy, which have been copiously discussed. The scope of the volume is ambitious: aspects of cookware from materials and manufacture to sale/distribution and use, and from the dawn of pottery in the Near East up to the present. Cookware refers to so much more than pots, as London demonstrates. Many other items, from trays and colanders to bread molds and cooking installations themselves are made of clay bodies and designed to withstand a range of high temperatures.

The volume consists of three parts: Traditional Ceramics in the Levant and Cyprus (Chapters 1–11), Ancient Manufacturing Techniques for Cookware (Chapters 12–13), and Cookware through the Ages (Chapters 14–22). Part I details regional parameters and resources, sources of information, and direct observation of the manufacture and use of cooking ceramics in modern contexts. This is crucial information, as it is safe to say that the majority of archaeologists today did not grow up in a household that used, let alone made, low-fire ceramic cookware. In modern households, we place our metal or glass cooking vessels over open flame without a second thought, something that earthenware cookpots cannot withstand. Even this basic fact is unknown to most of us. Ten thousand years of accumulated knowledge has been endangered by just a few hundred years of rapid global change. Projects like this volume have a larger context, to preserve traditional technologies from the few remaining low-fire cookware specialists operating in a world of plastic and metal.

Part I also conducts a survey of modern Levantine and Cypriot production and use of cookwares and accessories with many comparands from worldwide traditional cultures. Discussion includes that of food and cooking from ancient, Classical, Medieval, and more recent literary sources. Important details such as how to seal and season a cookware vessel have implications for those doing residue tests, as the test results may indicate not the primary ingredients of

local cuisine but something that served to seal porous pottery. Discussion of the behavior of various cookwares and kitchen accessories such as water jars, which were porous enough to ‘sweat’ and keep water cool, is also useful for archaeologists trying to distinguish the function of ancient vessels. Porosity and resistance to thermal shock were all considerations of ancient potters in choosing materials and production methods.


Part II details the repertoire of ancient ceramic cookware from the Levant, giving a useful typology, and examines the specifics of manufacture along with ethnographic parallels. Note is made of the telltale signs of manufacture that can be seen on a vessel, a valuable resource for archaeologists assessing their ceramic finds. The importance of the rounded base and the methods for making it are significant contributions here, as round-bottom vessels are completely foreign to the modern world. Attention is also paid to clay and temper selection, addition of handles, firing, and other details.

Part III follows the evolution of cookware from its origins in the Neolithic up to the present, drawing from a wide range of excavations and allowing for comparative discussion. Accessory kitchen equipment such as stone mortars and pestles are included, providing valuable context. Each era (Early Bronze, Middle Bronze, etc.) is treated in general, as there are minor sub-regional variations that could each fill a volume on their own. Further reading and sources are suggested at each interval.

Finally, a discussion of the connections between modern and ancient Levantine cookware is given with consideration of terminology, technology, and dietary change. The discussion is phrased as a series of questions, an effective way of helping a reader connect this work to their own. An appended glossary is also very helpful for terms originating in Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, and other languages. High production values and copious illustrations make this a volume of standout quality destined to become a fundamental reference text for ceramics specialists of the ancient Near East and beyond.

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