Storage in Ancient Epirus, Greece: Preliminary results from two Hellenistic sites

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This poster presents preliminary results of an archaeobotanical study from two sites (Nekromanteion of Acheron and Episkopi Servianon) situated in the region of Epirus, northwestern Greece. Terra incognita as far as archaeobotanical research is concerned. These sites are dated in various phases of the Hellenistic era (ca. 330/20 BC - 150/30 BC). Nekromanteion of Acheron is situated near the coast of Ionian sea in an area where Acheron river and its tributaries form flood plains resulting in deltas. Episkopi Servianon is found in inland mountainous Epirus, in a lowland area, ca. 470-500m altitude above sea level and with mean annual rainfall ca. 1000mm, in the area of the basin of the modern city of Ioannina and southern of its lake: Pamvotis. Their location in diverse environmental settings can provide information on different natural vegetation types and probably on diverse plant husbandry practices, a challenge for future archaeobotanical research. Additionally their diverse functional use in antiquity as suggested by archaeological research will give in its each case a host of information concerning the role and the economic significance of plants.

Nekromanteion of Acheron is situated in the southwestern part of Epirus, in the northwest shores of the ancient Acherousian Lake, where Acheron and Kokytos, the rivers of Hades, according to the ancient sources, meet. Numerous ancient authors, beginning with the Odyssey of Homer in the eighth century BC, make references to the lower Acheron River Valley (Bessonon et al 2003). Excavations at Nekromanteion of Acheron were conducted in 1958–1964 and 1976–1977, under the auspices of the Archaeological Society of Athens and led by Professor S. Dakaris. The site has received controversial interpretations by early and recent scholars. In early bibliography is well known as the Nekromanteion of Acheron or oracle of the dead (Dakaris 2000) whereas recent scholars suggest that the site was a fortified farmhouse due to quantities of household ceramics, agricultural tools and weaponry (Wiseman 1998; Baatz 1999).

A rectangular precinct of polygonal masonry surrounds an elaborated constructed building with thick walls ca. 3,30m and preserved height ca. 3,00m, erected in early Hellenistic period (late 4th–early 3rd century B.C.). The central building is divided by two walls into three main spaces: a central rectangular and two lateral areas. West and east of the central area are divided in turn each of the lateral areas in three squared rooms. A destruction of the building by Roman troops around 367 B.C. covered large and small storage pithoi and carbonized plant remains were preserved. Carbonized seeds of a great variety of wheat and pulses were found in the interior part or in the bottom of the storage vessels as well as on the floor. This poster focus on the archaeobotanical remains that have been preliminarily studied deriving from one room (K) where 9 large pithoi and some smaller storage vessels were found.

A range of crops was stored in room K such as emmer, spelt, bread/macaroni, six row, and possibly two row, hulled barley grains. Among pulses, broad beans (Vicia faba) outnumber all other pulses and were stored in a number of pithoi. Bitter vetch, common pea and lupine follow. Other plant species such as oat, naked barley, possibly rye, grass pea, chick pea and common vetch seem that were contaminants in the aforementioned stored crops. Fruits such as that of Prunus appear to be contaminants of the stored crops as well as other fruits not yet identified to species. Weeds or wild species seem to accompany almost all stored products. A concentration of grapes derives from one small storage vessel in room K. These have been found as whole fruits preserving the pips, skins and the stalks. Could they be pressed for the extraction of grape juice or the production of wine or could have been stored as dried grapes or raisins? If it is the last case it seems that were dehydrated due to exposure to concrete temperatures as they do not seem to have the typical form of raisins when they are carbonized. Further research could shed light on the kind of preservation of this product.

According to the excavator some of these products were ingredients of special offerings as are described in ancient sources e.g. in Nekyia in Homer’s Odyssey such as alphia, honey and wine given to the pilgrims. The prominent presence of broad beans in the majority of the pithos is attributed by the same scholar to their toxic properties since consumption of them green, without soaking them, can provoke illusions. These were given to the visitors so as to communicate with the souls of the underworld in combination with pork, barley bread, oysters (e.g. Dakaris PAE 1990; 2000). Stored products were found uncleared with lots of weeds. Among them the poisonous crop weed Lactuca serriola. So these were not ready for consumption and they do not constitute necessarily direct evidence for ceremonial activities. However the possibility of the ritual use of plants as suggested by the excavator could be affirmed by combining other evidence such as serving and drinking vessels, figurines etc. deriving from the same depositional event. This has not so far been corroborated. Most importantly a secure dating (e.g. by radiocarbon and ceramic typology), not yet carried out, of the last phase of occupation as well as an interdisciplinary approach of the bioarchaeological and ceramic material could shed light on the possibility of practicing rites in various phases of site occupation.

If the recent interpretation that the building was a rich fortified farmhouse is accepted, it becomes obvious that a great diversification of crops was a choice of the inhabitants for minimizing the risk of agricultural failure. In addition, broad beans seem to have played an important role either as fodder for animals or for human consumption. More research is needed to explore its role in this time period when war conflicts were taking place resulting probably in malnutrition.

Recent excavations at the site of Episkopi Servianon located in the interior of Epirus, near the modern city of Ioannina were conducted by the IFP Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical antiquities under the supervision of Dr. G. Plakou. Research revealed carpenter’s installations dating in the Hellenistic period and commercial practices—son of preserved colored stored products derive from the main building where storage vessels and a number of commercial amphora were found (Plakou 2008). Among the carbonized material, a moderate quantity of olive stones (unbroken and broken) is counted. The archaeological and archaeobotanical evidence indicate that a kind of community organization was probably taking place there. Olives were, most probably, not cultivated in this part of Epirus due to the climatic constraints for olive trees to grow. They could have been brought from the coastal areas of Epirus. Among other products, cultivated in this area, were oat and hulled barley. Among pulses, broad beans hold the dominant position. Follow common peas and lupines. More archaeobotanical research is needed to shed light on the role of plants.

Literary sources provide information about ancient agriculture but are rather sparse and focus in peasant farming of other areas of the Greek world. The combination of the two lines of evidence: archaeobotanical and literary sources will provide valuable information about diversification of agricultural economy in the Hellenistic era.