BETWEEN SYRIA AND THE HIGHLANDS

STUDIES IN HONOR OF
GIORGIO BUCCELLATI & MARILYN KELLY-BUCCELLATI

Stefano Valentini - Guido Guarducci
(*editors*)

Arbor sapientiaE
E D I T O R E

2019

THE TERQA CLOVES AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF AROMA

Monica L. Smith
Department of Anthropology
Cotsen Institute of Archaeology
Institute of the Environment and Sustainability
University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract
The discovery of spices at Bronze-Age Terqa in Syria provide the opportunity to consider long-distance exchange in aromatics as a component of ancient cuisine, ritual, and social life, and the opportunity to assess the role of "singular" finds as a component of archaeological theory.

1. Introduction

The starting-points for this paper are the tiny botanical remains found by Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati and Giorgio Buccellati in their excavations at Terqa in 1976, where they reported cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) from a second-millenium BCE context.[1] Yet at the time of the discovery this seemed impossible: cloves come only from the Southeast Asian archipelago of the Meluku islands, which would have made this the first such find in the ancient Near East.

We should not be surprised when such discoveries occur, however. Ancient people were certainly very creative, and cognizant of the social value of handling unusual items. The perception that singular objects are "rare" or "unique" is more likely due to our relative lack of knowledge about the scope of ancient material culture than to the perceptions of uniqueness on the part of ancient people. After all, most sites have been excavated to 1% or less of their entire occupational areas, suggesting that our statistics are often misleading. Instead of viewing singletons as aberrations, archaeologists should be encouraged to think of them as a leading edge for discoveries elsewhere in the site and region.

2. Singular Items

The recovery of a singular object in an archaeological context is treated with a certain intellectual curiosity because it cannot be assessed through the usual practices of comparison and statistics. Is it a singleton because we have recovered so few of them and excavated so little, or is it unusual because it was scarce in its own time? As a physical fact, its appearance *must* be explained somehow. Of course, it is always possible that the singleton is the result of an unusual site formation process, such as bioturbation that has introduced later elements into an earlier context. In the case of the Terqa finds, such a dismissal is impossible, for the cloves were found in a jar that was upside down, and the building in which it was located was burnt. Thus the find is a clarion call to evaluate singularity in a secure ancient context.

Singular objects in antiquity were the result of purposeful ancient human acts emanating from a variety of intents. Some singletons were crafted as unique works of art; others were "beta" versions of new technologies that never achieved popularity or became popular much later. And some singular finds in archaeological contexts represent items that were naturally abundant or manufactured in great quantities in their locus of origin but that are found in smaller and smaller quantities at a temporal or spatial distance from the source.

Each type of singleton encompasses a specific theoretical apparatus of analysis. Items designed as singular creations elicit a great deal of interest, not least in today's museum cases. In ancient times as in the present day, elites sponsored the crafting of distinct objects and rewarded traders who brought forth unusual items. Yet such objects were perceived by their owners as being within a general parameter of value, in which distinction was encompassed within a set of recognized characteristics, such as an especially labor-intensive or carefully-crafted cup among many other vessels, or a rare bead among others on a strand. The emergence of new items could only be intelligible to potential users if such items were within a range of already-known qualities within the "bandwidth" of communication.[2]

[1] Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1977/78; 1983.

[2] For the archaeological concept of "bandwidth" see Stiner 2014.

Some ancient items were undoubtedly unique not because they were sought-after exemplars of a particular genre but because no one could figure out what to do with them. Ancient craftsmakers experimented with new strategies of production and decoration that sometimes revolutionized consumption patterns, as in the case of the innovation of bronze metallurgy or the advent of Attic red-figure vases. Yet some innovations did not result in an increased production or consumption because they were not yet perceived as useful or because their adoption entailed social or practical restraints that people were unwilling to make at the time.[3]

In some cases, items that were abundant in their point of origin (such as shells or stones or ivory) came to be rarer and rarer as they were traded further away in the process of what Colin Renfrew has called "down-the-line" trade.[4] In this model of object transmission, items are dispersed from their point of origin along trade routes with intermediate stops, in which any such stop might result in a few items staying locally while the others continue to be carried forward. At every point, the distribution of such objects followed purposeful decisions about whether to keep or pass along novel items, such that there is rarely a simple distance-decay curve or linear falloff rate.

In sum, what makes objects "unique" is often not their original circumstances or natural distribution but mediated through the decisions and values of ancient people as well as our circumstances of recovery. As we excavate and explore the world's archaeological sites in greater detail and over longer time periods, objects that appear at first to be outliers become joined by other finds. The result is an increasingly complete picture of the way in which trade has permeated our global village for thousands of years, as well as a greater understanding of the way in which individual decisions and actions in the past resulted in a complex and multifaceted archaeological record.

3. The Organic and the Perishable

Much of archaeology depends on the recovery of tangible and durable elements of ancient life: architecture, stone tools, and artifacts such as beads, grinding stones, and pottery vessels. As humans diversified their artifact repertoire, there are more and more items that occasionally survive the passage of time. By contrast, the assessment of the role of perishables in ancient patterns of trade is sometimes harder to grasp. Ethnohistoric and textual accounts of the large-scale production of perishables illustrates that we are often missing a good deal of trade activity because of the ephemeral, organic nature of goods such as salt, cloth, wood, and food.

Among the categories of perishable objects most used by our species, food ranks the highest in terms of regular intake and household manipulation. Archaeologists have largely focused on caloric intake as the rubric for the assessment of both forager and agricultural impacts, although increasing attention has been paid to matters of food preference as a component of selection among myriad types of edibles.[5] Yet somewhere along the way, it was not merely the type of food, nor its selection, that was the only means by which items became viewed as "good to eat." The development of varied modes of preparation provided the impetus for a diversification of production practices in the form of cuisine, particularly after the development of pottery vessels which allowed for boiled, stewed, simmered, and other combinatorial modes of preparation.

Cuisine, as an idiosyncratic yet culturally-bounded concept of daily practice, provides the opportunity to examine the interface between trade and food preference whenever exotic ingredients enabled the addition of novel flavors. Although grains are known to have been traded and imported in ancient times to result in the diffusion of new crops (maize from its original domestication point in Mexico adopted in South America; millets from Africa adopted in the Bronze Age cultures of the Indus region of today's Pakistan and western India), spices are different because they usually cannot be grown outside of their place of origin and thus are direct evidence for the transfer of products, sometimes along great distances.[6]

4. Spices as a Form of Cuisine

The study of spices, as a subset of the archaeology of food and cuisine, links the world of calories with the larger world of ephemeral meaning through cookery. When the bulk of a meal is made up of carbohydrates and meat, spices make a mark all out of proportion to their size or weight because they lend an altogether distinct scent and flavor to the food. Nina Etkin has noted that "spices are signatures... that distinguish the cuisines of ethnically diverse peoples and, within groups, mark social asymmetries through varied applications, combinations, and frequency and volume of consumption."[7]

An archaeology of aroma highlights the agentive use of trade goods that were displayed through the release of scents into the surrounding atmosphere

[3] e.g. Schiffer 2008 on the earliest uses of electricity; Crown, Wills 1995 on the adoption of pottery in the prehistoric American Southwest.
[4] Renfrew 1975, 41-43.
[5] e.g. Smith 2010; Wadley, Hayden 2015; Zeder 2012.
[6] Van der Veen 2015, 427.
[7] Etkin 2006, 84.

and the experience of taste when spices were infused in food. The archaeology of aroma parallels the increasing interest in the ephemera of existence that were nonetheless guiding components of ancient activities, as shown by recent studies on the archaeology of darkness, the archaeology of color, the archaeology of performance, and the archaeology of dance, ritual, and music.[8]

An archaeology of aroma is an archaeology of intimacy, of home and hearth, of family and friends gathered around a fragrant dish, usually served warm as a marker of proximate time. When food is "ready," it is a moment of synergy that marks the beginning of a daily event that also binds people together and creates a framework for memory-making. An archaeology of aroma is also about the lingering scents that carry out into the broader world from the hearth itself. Even everyday cooking, such as baking bread or roasting meat, carries an unmistakeable fragrance as well as a directionality such that passers-by can discern from whose house a particular scent emanates. At that point the aroma is no longer possessed by the household that has cooked the food, but enters into the public realm.

Because spices are generally traded from small and localized places of origin, their appearance and use far from those origins provide an olfactory proof of connectivity, household wherewithal, and access to traded goods. Nor is the reality of long-distance contact something that renders spices used only on special occasions; witness, for example, the use of cardamom from the Indian subcontinent that is a staple in Scandinavian baked goods today, or the global presence of pepper as the counterpart to common salt and a standard condiment on restaurant and domestic tabletops alike. Spices are lightweight but effective arbiters of taste (in both the physical and metaphorical sense), with a carryover into the social realm.

In her study of what she calls "vibrant matter," Jane Bennett discusses the ways in which food is not merely a passive entity, but is itself "an actant in an agentic assemblage."[9] Although Bennett's perspective considers food in general, her assessment of agency and vibrancy is particularly apt when applied to spices. Because they contain volatile compounds that release their aroma even without cooking, spices are in a perpetual state of becoming and when kept in a jar are able to perform an olfactory task over and over again with little visible wearing away.

5. The Bronze-Age Spice Trade

The use of spices is not merely a sign of the investment of resources into the creation of particular tastes (although that is important), but an integration of everyday pharmacology given that spices contain enhanced properties that make them an intermediate entity between food and medicine.[10] In the Bronze Age of Mesopotamia and the Levant, people made use of many local and regional herbs and aromatics. Mesopotamian texts refer to medicine, perfume, and incense; the Bible similarly refers to desirable aromatics such as frankincense and myrrh.[11] The draw of aroma as a culinary and medicinal ingredient was the natural rationale for a trade in aromatics that began in the Bronze Age during a time when many other perishable trade goods such as textiles also were exchanged across long distances.[12]

Cumulative evidence for the spice trade is aided by the fact that some spices are highly recognizable and analytically distinctive.[13] In 2013, Dvory Namdar and colleagues reported on the recovery of cinnamaldehyde in ten small narrow-necked Iron Age flasks from the Levant (11th-mid 9th cent BCE), and suggested that the cinnamaldehyde could only have come from the Indian subcontinent or Southeast Asia in the form of cinnamon. They placed the recognition of cinnamaldehyde within a broader context of precocious occurrences including the recovery of peppercorns in the Egyptian mummy of Ramesses II (13th c. BCE), and conclude that such finds "attest unequivocally that indeed, spices from South East Asia reached the 'West' already during the Late Bronze Age."[14] Moreover, the team identified traces of cinnamaldehyde in excavated vessels from five different sites, confirming that there was a much more widespread access to exotic spices than had earlier been conceptualized.

Thus, the cloves at Terqa are in good company with other discoveries of spices originating from the Indian subcontinent and beyond. At Terqa, the items in question were found in the first season of excavation, and described as "Carbonized spices, found inside an upside down jar in the storage room ST 4 in SG4."[15] This storage room was within a structure identified as the "House of Puzurum," a structure across the street from the temple of Ninkarrak. The find was placed into social context by the excavators as "evidence of long distance trade of a very fragile commodity which

[8] e.g., Dowd, Hensey 2016; Gonlin, Nowell 2018; Hosier 1995; Inomata, Coben 2006; Looper 2009.
[9] Bennett, 2010, 51.
[10] Etkin 2006, 53.
[11] Ben-Yehoshua *et al.* 2012.
[12] Smith 2013.
[13] E.g. Kingwell-Banham *et al.* 2018, 1565, 1567 on the single clove in the archaeological investigations at Mantai, Sri Lanka.
[14] Namdar *et al.* 2013, 14.
[15] Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1977/78, 94.

required specialized use and therefore specialized markets – all the more remarkable inasmuch as the find comes from a rather simple middle-class household."[16]

The reporting of the finds from Terqa, combined with the types of reporting on spices found in other unexpectedly "early" contexts, provides the opportunity to understand and map out broader mosaic patterns of ancient trade. Such connectivities illustrate that single finds are not merely lone data points in the cartographies of time; ancient people created everyday worlds out of exotica in ways that stretch our imaginations and provide a path forward for research. A future archaeology of aroma depends on the combination of textual studies and extensive and rigorous recovery of the traces of organic elements from archaeological contexts. Excavations that make use of flotation and other forms of paleobotanical recovery are more likely to report the recovery of the physical fragments of spices. Other promising sources of study include the analysis of coprolites and the analysis of chemical residues in plaster, pottery, and soils.[17]

6. Conclusion

There is an irony in the long-distance trade in spices, in that the items that were brought at such a distance and with some expense were intended to be consumed and to disappear from the physical world leaving only aroma and memory behind. Yet it is in those traces that social longevity is the greatest, like the other sensory elements that permeate the realm of home and family such as music, emotion, gestures, and physical ambiance. These everyday elements combine to create a sense of place from which individual identities emerge, with the daily acts of food consumption providing a bridge between the biological and social worlds of care and familiarity. As Janet A. Flammang has noted, "Cuisines are... an example of thoughtful practice. They are bodies of knowledge: distilled over time through a process of trial and error, passed down by word of mouth and hands-on learning... providing sustenance and pleasure on a daily basis."[18]

The thoughtful practices of cuisine integrate both grand and humble households with the broader cultural worlds of trade and transportation; in the past as in the present, food was never just a matter of nutrients and calories. Cuisine is a performance that has numerous time-stages with a preconsumption phase of cooking aromas that prepare the eater for the event to come as well as advertising to others that food preparation is being undertaken, followed by an actual consumption phase and then the discard of the food waste (bones, shells, and other inedible parts as well as food scraps and occasional discard of containers and eating utensils). Throughout, the aroma of food lingers in the hearth and home beyond the brief moment of eating. Like other "small things" in the archaeological record, the Terqa cloves reveal gestures of an ancient globalization whose impacts were intertwined with hearth and home.

[16] Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1983, 54.
[17] Boenke 2007; Namdar *et al.* 2013; Pecci *et al.* 2017.
[18] Flammang 2009, 162.

7. Acknowledgments

It is a great pleasure to offer this modest chapter in honor of Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati and Giorgio Buccellati. Throughout my years at UCLA they have been gracious and generous colleagues and friends, with whom it has always been a wonderful pleasure to share conversations about archaeological theory interwoven with warm observations about family life and some wonderful meals. Bravi!

References

Ben-Yehoshua *et al.* 2012
Ben-Yehoshua, S., C. Borowitz, and L.O. Hanuš, Frankincense, Myrrh, and Balm of Gilead: Ancient Spices of Southern Arabia and Judea, in J. Janick *Horticultural Reviews vol. 39*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, N. J., 2012, 1-76.
Bennett 2010
Bennett, J., *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things,* Duke University Press, Durham, 2010.
Boenke 2007
Boenke, N., Human Excrement from a Prehistoric Salt Mine: A Window onto Daily Life, in K. C. Twiss, *The Archaeology of Food and Identity*, Center for Archaeological Investigations, Southern Illinois University Carbondale Occasional Paper 34, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL, 2007, 69-84.
Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1977/78
Buccellati, G., M. Kelly-Buccellati, The Terqa Archaeological Project: First Preliminary Report., *Les Annales Archeologiques Arabes Syriennes* 27-28, 1977-78, 71-96.
Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1983
Buccellati, G., M. Kelly-Buccellati, Terqa: The First Eight Seasons, *Les Annales Archeologiques Arabes Syriennes* 33(2), 1983, 47-67.
Crown, Wills 1995
Crown, P. L., W. H. Wills, The Origins of Southwestern Ceramic Containers: Women's Time Allocation and Economic Intensification, *Journal of Anthropological Research* 51(2), 1995, 173-186.
Dowd, Hensey 2016
Dowd, M, R. Hensey, ed., *The Archaeology of Darkness*, Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2016.
Etkin 2006
Etkin, N. L., *Edible Medicines: An Ethnophramacology of*

Food, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 2006.
Flammang 2009
Flammang, J. A., *The Taste for Civilization: Food, Politics, and Civil Society*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2009.
Gonlin, Nowell 2018
Gonlin, N., A. Nowell, eds, *Archaeology of the Night*, University Press of Colorado, Boulder, 2018.
Hosier 1995
Hosier, D., Sound, Color and Meaning in the Metallurgy of Ancient West Mexico, *World Archaeology* 27(1), 1995, 100-115.
Inomata, Coben 2006
Inomata, T., L.S. Coben, ed., *Archaeology of Performance: Theaters of Power, Community, and Politics*, AltaMira Press, Lanham, MD, 2006.
Kingwell-Banham *et al.* 2018
Kingwell-Banham, E., W. Bohingamuwa, N. Perera, G. Adikari, A. Crowther, D. Q. Fuller, and N. Boivin, Spice and Rice: Pepper, Cloves and Everyday Cereal Foods at the Ancient Port of Mantai, Sri Lanka, *Antiquity* 366, 2018, 1552-1570.
Looper 2009
Looper, M. G., *To Be Like Gods: Dance in Ancient Maya Civilization*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2009.
Namdar *et al.* 2013
Namdar, D., A. Gilboa, R. Neumann, I. Finkelstein, and S. Weiner, Cinnamaldehyde in Early Iron Age Phoenician Flasks Raises the Possibility of Levantine Trade with South East Asia, *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* 12(3), 2013, 1-19.
Pecci *et al.* 2017
Pecci, A., L. Barba, and A. Ortiz, Chemical Residues as Anthropic Activity Markers: Ethnoarchaeology, Experimental Archaeology and Archaeology of Food Production and Consumption, *Environmental Archaeology* 22(4), 2017, 343-353.
Renfrew 1975
Renfrew, C., Trade as Action at a Distance: Questions of Integration and Communication, in J. A. Sabloff, C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky, *Ancient Civilization and Trade*, School of American Research, Santa Fe, NM, 1975, 3-59.
Schiffer 2008
Schiffer, M. B., *Power Struggles: Scientific Authority and the Creation of Practical Electricity Before Edison*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2008.
Smith 2010
Smith, M.L., *A Prehistory of Ordinary People*, University of Arizona, Tucson, 2010.
Smith 2013
Smith, M. L., The Substance and Symbolism of Long-Distance Exchange: Textiles as Desired Trade Goods in the Bronze Age Middle Asian Interaction Sphere, in S. Abraham, P. Gullipalli, T. Razcek, and U. Rizvi, *Connections and Complexity: New Approaches to the Archaeology of South and Central Asia*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 2013, 143-160.
Stiner 2014
Stiner, M. C., Finding a Common Bandwidth: Causes of Convergence and Diversity in Paleolithic Beads, *Biological Theory* 9, 2014, 51-64.
Van der Veen 2015
Van der Veen, M. Quseir al-Qadim (Egypt), in K. B. Metheny, M. C. Beaudry, *Archaeology of Food: An Encyclopedia*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2015, 426-27.
Wadley, Hayden 2015
Wadley, G., B. Hayden, Pharmacological Influences on the Neolithic Transition, *Journal of Ethnobiology* 35(3), 2015, 566-584.
Zeder 2012
Zeder, M. A., The Broad Spectrum Revolution at 40: Resource Diversity, Intensification, and an Alternative to Optimal Foraging Explanations, *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 31(3), 2012, 241-264.