

ISMEO
ASSOCIAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE
DI STUDI SUL MEDITERRANEO E L'ORIENTE

SERIE ORIENTALE ROMA

FONDATA NEL 1950 DA GIUSEPPE TUCCI

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NUOVA SERIE

Vol. 17

R O M A
ISMEO
2019

SERIE ORIENTALE ROMA

n.s. 17

Archaeology of Food

New Data from International Missions in Africa and Asia

Proceedings of the 1st Workshop
on the Archaeology of Food

Rome, 26 May 2016

coordination of Barbara E. Barich, Lorenzo Costantini

edited by Marco Baldi, Roberto Dan, Matteo Delle Donne,
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ROMA
SCIENZE E LETTERE
2019

*Questo volume è stato pubblicato con un contributo del Progetto MIUR
"Studi e ricerche sulle culture dell'Asia e dell'Africa: tradizione e continuità,
rivitalizzazione e divulgazione".*

TUTTI I DIRITTI RISERVATI

ISBN 9788866871675

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Via Piave, 7 – 00187 Roma
Tel. 0039/06/4817656 – Fax 0039/06/48912574
e-mail: info@scienzelettere.com
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www.ismeo.eu

Layout by Marco Baldi

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PREFACE

In this volume, ISMEO – The International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, publishes the proceedings of the Conference “Archaeology of Food - The Contribution of Italian and International Missions in Africa and Asia” (Palazzo Baleani, Rome, 26 May 2016).

This is a first day of study that ISMEO has intended to dedicate to the work of some of its oldest archaeological missions focusing on the theme of nutrition, analyzed from all its many disciplinary perspectives. The Conference has intended to represent a point of convergence in the studies of Asia and Africa archaeology in a very wide diachronic dimension, and offered the opportunity for meeting and exchanging scientific views to the interdisciplinary and inter-regional research teams working under the aegis of ISMEO and other Italian and international institutions.

This same interest has long been active in the ISMEO Study Group “Archaeology of Food”, promoter of the Conference and of this Proceedings volume.

Archaeology is in fact one of the main activity areas of ISMEO in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, thanks to specific agreements with international Universities and host countries. In recent years, as part of the Five-year-Project “Studi e ricerche sulle culture dell’Asia e dell’Africa: tradizione e continuità, rivitalizzazione e divulgazione” subsidised by the Italian Ministry for Education, University and Research (MIUR), the number of missions operating with ISMEO involvement has greatly expanded. They are active in several Asian, African and European countries: Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, Tunisia, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Oman, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Thailand.

Let us therefore imagine that the one represented in these pages is the first of a series of appointments on a subject that has become progressively so central in modern archaeological research, also thanks to Italian archaeology and especially to the missions opened in the Middle East more than half a century ago by Giuseppe Tucci and his ISMEO.

The subject of the Conference and similar themes are chosen by ISMEO also as a contribution toward the study of renewable energies and their relationship with the environment throughout the history of mankind, in view of a future in an increasingly interconnected, human and sustainable world.

PROF. ADRIANO V. ROSSI
President of ISMEO

ARCHAEOLOGY OF FOOD: FROM THE FIELD TO A SCENERY'S RECONSTRUCTION

Environment and nutrition are among the most studied issues of archaeological research. The results achieved have contributed to explain basic processes such as the production of food, the origin and spread of agriculture, and animal husbandry.

Lorenzo Costantini had the idea for this Workshop at the same time as Expo 2015. It then suffered some delays and eventually took place in May 2016. This theme was immediately one around which the activities and ideas of archaeologists operating in distant territories and even different periods could be discussed. One of the main purposes of this meeting was, in fact, to highlight the archaeological research currently being conducted in Africa and Asia. The missions that are represented here in large part belong to the ISMEO and are co-financed by the MAECI Directorate General for the Promotion of the Country System.

This volume only contains the contributions received by ISMEO. Other scholars belonging to Italian and international institutions attended the conference: in addition to communications by prof. Andrea Manzo (Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"; ISMEO), dr Simone Mulazzani (Aix-Marseille Université) and prof. Emanuele Papi (Università degli Studi di Siena), posters were presented by prof. Emanuela Cristiani (Sapienza Università di Roma; University of Cambridge) and dr Ilaria Venir (Sapienza Università di Roma).

The history of studies places changes in the procurement of resources as turning points in the development of humankind and society. Among these we know particular importance is given to the beginning of the cultivation of plants and to agriculture, which is conventionally placed at around 10,000 years ago. Then there would be a series of changes—the first villages and then cities, the population increase, social complexity, the state—which anticipate modern societies. Conventionally pre-agricultural communities are referred to as hunter-gatherer communities, while the food production phase is divided between shepherds and farmers. These latter activities almost always combined.

Current archaeology, understood as an anthropological reconstruction of the past, has made the economic-social aspects one of the key points of the investigation. At the same time, a strong awareness of the interconnection of actions and spheres that constitute the life of a community has developed (technology-economy-ideology). Therefore studying the economic aspects does not mean focusing solely on the material aspects of the society (this is sometimes the accusation that is given to the ecological and functionalist approach), because the reconstruction proceeds from the material to the immaterial sphere of ideology, beliefs, and symbols of a social group. To do this, it is obviously necessary to always be elaborating new supporting theories and new methods for extracting fresh information even from apparently data of limited significance.

In this respect, archaeology is a field of abundant experimentation and innovation. We are witnessing the adoption of new techniques in field research with the application of digital tools and technologies for mapping and recording, which provide the highest quality documentation for territories that in some cases did not have any cartographic mapping. Equally advanced are the analysis technologies in the laboratory, thanks to which the excavation data can now be sectioned, scanned and observed under a microscope to obtain the most complete data possible. In addition to the classificatory and typological study of the artefacts, there is also now a technological and functional one, capable not only of indicating the function but also identifying the raw materials used. In some cases these analyses broaden the view of the foods used and indicate their routes and exchanges, which as a result put also separated areas in contact with one another.

For those who deal with very ancient periods, the ecological approach is essential for understanding how the environmental stresses were received by the society and what countermeasures were adopted. As is known, ecology studies the relationships between the human sphere and the natural world in its various articulations. For example, it is important to know in which seasons some types of plants are available because their presence in a storage area tells us also in which period this was used and helps us to build a model of the group's movements. The same also applies to the faunas whose migration and reproduction periods can give us similar indications. In the latter case the identification of the age of death, on which the presence or absence of control in reproduction practices can be drawn, is also important.

In later periods the reasons for the change, or persistence, of cultural facts may be different, dominated more by the choices and traditions of the social groups. The ideological and symbolic motifs can then become stronger and impose different interpretative models. In any case, the economic sphere and the ideological sphere are always connected. An example of this occurs in the appearance of new and more elaborate tools or in some particularly sought-after styles of ceramic. Not to mention the production of luxury items, jewellery, and

portable art. The appearance of new tools, or changes in their use, may be related to new requirements imposed by changes in the environment. These in fact, having an impact on the type of fauna and vegetation, can act as a stimulus for the development of new technologies and also influence how they are used. These very same tools, however, in the refinement of the manufacturing, in the preciousness of the raw material used, become a display of status and, therefore, authorise deductions of a social nature and at the same time the frequent decorative elements show us the symbolic world of the society that produced them.

The Workshop provided a broad panorama of these positions: the contributions collected in this volume start from late Palaeolithic situations that already show an interest in the selection of certain species of plants. The beginning of the Holocene period is accompanied by an intensification of these practices and by forms of exploitation that anticipate true agriculture.

The main nucleus of the contributions focused on situations between the 3rd and 1st millennia BC when also more selective preferences are affirmed: selections of aromas and spices; the importance of new animal species (for example the donkey); the introduction of food distribution and sharing practices.

The analysis of food offerings within funerary contexts represents another significant theme that is handled, which is important for establishing the relationship between the ritual sphere and human environment.

We did not want to follow a geographical criterion in the distribution of the contributions but rather a chronological one. A diachronic survey but also a transversality that comes from the combination of North Africa and the Near and Middle East. The juxtaposition of geographical areas that are also very distant gave rise to interesting topics for discussion in the final session of the conference.

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