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Cooking Vessels, Volumes, and Venues: Evidence from LM IIIC Kavousi Vronta and Karphi

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Our understanding of diet and culinary practices at the Late Minoan IIIC settlement sites of Kavousi Vronta and Karphi is based upon several different types of physical evidence that have been recovered through excavation. These include the botanical and faunal remains of plants and animals available to and consumed by the inhabitants; ceramic vessels used for the cooking and consumption of food and drink; built and fixed cooking installations, such as hearths and ovens; and the architectural spaces within the settlements where food preparation and consumption most likely took place. Each type of evidence is, by itself, incomplete and dependent upon differential preservation resulting from site formation processes specific to each archaeological context. Taken together, however, they allow us to gain important insights into key aspects of food cultivation, provisioning, processing, preparation, and convivial practices on Crete in the 12th and 11th centuries BC. In this paper, we will compare and contrast the evidence for food preparation and dining at each site, paying special attention to the forms and sizes of ceramic vessels used for cooking and consumption.

Kavousi Vronta produced much evidence for cooking and dining. The community was based on independent households that were organized into kinship clusters. Each household was provided with a large room with a hearth, and often with a smaller cooking installation, or oven, that could be closed up for baking. Cooking pottery included dishes, tripods, jars/amphorae, jugs, and lids. Scorch patterns on the vessels suggest how they were used in food preparation. Cooking dishes may have been placed directly into the hearths or rested on crude earthen stands. Tripods and other jars were most likely used for stews and other boiled dishes on the hearths, sometimes including cuts of meat that were "pot-sized" and broken to take full advantage of fat and other nutrients in the bone marrow. None of the vessels are small enough to have been placed in the ovens, which may thus have been used for baking bread or other foodstuffs without the use of a formal container. Some cups, many deep bowls, kylikes, and kraters comprised the majority of the consumption pottery. Kraters may have stood on decorated cylindrical stands. One building was larger than the others, showed no sign of growth over time, had enormous storage capacity, and produced evidence for convivial events held within, including a large number of oversized kylikes possibly used in drinking ceremonies. The other unusual building, a shrine, showed no evidence of cooking or food storage, although it did have a hearth.

Karphi was a larger settlement, and recent excavations have indicated that it was even more extensive than what was uncovered in the 1930s. Independent households were difficult to define, and although there are “blocks” of rooms, it is not clear that these represent the same social organization as the residential clusters at Vronda. Cooking installations were found in only a few of the rooms, but recent excavations have identified several more. Two ovens were found, both larger than the Vronda examples, including one in the Baker’s House that may have been communal. There was no single large building, as at Vronda, suggesting a different socio-political organization of the site. The main religious building was larger than the one at Vronda, and it produced cooking pottery as well as cult equipment; other ritual areas can also be identified around the site. Cooking pottery was common in the houses, but only whole or nearly complete vessels were kept and published by the excavators. These vessels included cooking dishes, tripods, jars/amphorae, jugs, lids, slabs, and a stand. Pottery for consumption was similar to that from Vronda; cups, deep bowls, kylikes, and kraters are common. While in form the ceramics from Karphi are similar to those from Vronda, their size and capacities show significant differences that may point to dissimilar patterns of socializing, dining, and feasting in these two Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlements.