

MYTILENE. MISCELLANEA CULINARIA: UNORTHODOX CHYTRA, TAGENON & BRAZIER

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Résumé: *Alors que les céramiques grises de Lesbos monopolisent l'attention, la poterie culinaire de l'île reste encore dans l'ombre. La batterie de cuisine d'époque tardo-hellénistique / début de l'époque romaine des fouilles de Mytilène présentée ici inclut un spécimen exceptionnel de marmite fragmentaire, dont tout laisse à penser qu'elle était destinée à la cuisson à la vapeur de céréales, à l'instar des couscoussiers traditionnels d'Afrique du Nord.*

Abstract: *Whereas Lesbian grey wares deserve full attention, Lesbian cooking pots rather remain in the background. The set of kitchen equipment of late Hellenistic - beginning of Roman date from Mytilene excavations presented here includes an item of utmost importance, viz. a fragmentary lidded vessel of chytra type obviously intended for steam cooking of cereals, like the traditional ones used for cuscus making in North Africa.*

Among the 1987 season in Mytilene contexts of North Harbour excavation by Nikomedia St. in Mytilene¹, the one referenced MYT 87 II 2 QR L5 deserves particular attention as being centered on a set of fragmentary kitchen pots, pans and equipment, viz. one *chytra*, one *teganon* and one brazier, the dating of which

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¹ Excavation report *apud* Hector Williams 1988 & 1991, in the archives of Mytilene. The authors are indebted to Professor Hector Williams, head of the British Columbia excavation team for enabling them to work upon the pottery finds for publication ; for their advice and help, to our good colleagues John Hayes and Gerry Schaus; for their kind welcome and efficient support, to the staff members of the Mytilene Archaeological Museum.

seems to go back to the Late Hellenistic period or beginning of Roman times².

Most unusual appear several sherds of what we interpret as the upper part of a *chytra*. At first sight, its general look recalls that of a *psykter*³, but its overfired clay as well as its soot coating clearly indicates that we are faced with a cooking pot (Figs. 1-4), more exactly with a lidded cooking pot with flanged rim, the shoulder profile of which points to a globular or even ovoid body. At the level of its maximum diameter, a neat horizontal band of tearing off is visible, the width of which might well correspond to that of a section of peripheral projecting flange (Fig. 2), with fold down rim, as if this device was intended to be fit into a lower counterpart (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, only the upper part of the vessel can be reconstructed, whereas nothing is preserved from the bottom (Fig. 4). Therefore, the question which must be considered lies in the identification of the lower counterpart on which the pot was fitting on through its peripheral flange. Such devices seem quite uncommon on ancient cooking pots. In the present case, it was obviously intended to seal more or less hermetically the space between the pot and the undetermined lower counterpart it was resting on, whereas the rounded bottom of the *chytra* was generally supported by several radial lugs distributed around the rim inside of the cooking stand, leaving the hot combustion gas go out. For that reason, one might well reconstruct our *chytra* stacking up, not over a traditional cooking stand, but on another type of deep-bodied container of same diameter as the peripheral flange of our *chytra* and fit to welcome its bottom. Moreover, as revealed by radial remains of underside attachment, this peripheral flange was fitted with at least one handle, more probably two opposite ones, for better handling of the upper vessel.

At that stage, though somewhat anachronistic at first sight, such a pairing of two stacked pots fitting together cannot but evoke the traditional North-African cooking device intended for *cuscus* steam-cooking⁴. In the case we should be faced with a precursor of these double cooking devices, our *chytra* would not have been in direct contact with the cooking stand or *eschara* and the steam-cooking process would implicate for it a strainer-like pierced bottom instead of a plain one, as well as a lower deep container of fairly large capacity, intended for holding both the lower part of the *chytra* and the needed quantity of bouillon⁵. Such a stacking of

² The pottery assemblage (West Slope, Lagynos style and ESA) as well as a Rhodian transport amphora of « horn handled » type provide an approximate dating centred on the interval mid 2nd / 1st c. BC and 1st c. AD.

³ On that shape, see DROUGOU 1975.

⁴ FRANCONIE *et alii* 2010, esp. p. 167-169. *Cuscus* was firstly mentioned by the famous Arab traveler Ibn Batuta (mid 14th c. AD), but pierced bottoms of cooking pots from Carthage have been reported as early as Masinissa's time (c. 240-149).

⁵ The most concise statement about *cuscus* processing and the required cooking pot used for it is to be found *apud* ZAOULI 2007, p. 122. In preparing *cuscus*, dough is used to join the two stacked vessels, while the upper pot may be covered with a simple napkin instead a solid lid, seemingly either plain or drilled, because in some recipes the sign that cooking is finished is the strength of the vapors rising to the top of the pot. However, outside Maghreb, cooking pots for *cuscus* appear much simpler, e.g. in Egypt, where the traditional shapes often look very close to ancient Greek ones, such as the assumed *koskina* from Lemnos.

two separate vessels, combining one lower plain chamber topped by an upper one with pierced bottom is well and truly attested indeed among the Hellenistic cooking equipment of the Athenian Agora, though one-piece⁶. Yet, it is only for the Roman period that evidence becomes fully clear, even if literary sources remain rather silent on about it⁷: among the finds from Pompeii, a complete vessel, still labelled *colum* (**Fig. 5**), provides us the clue to the problem in validating our own interpretation from scattered parts⁸. As for the Byzantine period, some complete globular cooking pots from Sardis, also with drilled bottom, have been reported too⁹.

However, an additional morphological odd feature prompts to qualify such a reconstruction, viz. the rather narrow diameter (13cm) of *chytra's* mouth not ideally intended for doughy food cooking. Therefore, a plausible alternative interpretation, also combining two stacked vessels but both with plain bottom, viz. that of a double boiler – alias *bain-marie* –, well suited to the cooking of liquid or half-liquid dishes, especially those including volatile components, such as wine in addition to cereals and condiments.

One cannot help having in mind indeed the case of the famous *kykeon*, which was a mix of wine and cereals, first of all barley, something like a soup or even a porridge, that Circe added with grated cheese and honey¹⁰. But without digressing so far, it is clear that the ancient Greek diet was mostly cereal-based¹¹, first of all in the form of basic porridge (μάζα), made of coarsely ground barley flour (ἄλφιτα)¹² mixed with water or milk and heated. Moreover, Hippocrates quotes two variants of *maza*: a compact one, *triptê* and another half-liquid one, *atriptê*¹³. A keen problem lies in the fact that, if the Greeks already made the distinction between «dry» cooking (viz. frying, roasting and baking) under the generic verb ὀπτᾶω, and «wet» cooking (viz. stewing, poaching and braising) enlisted under the banner verb ἔψω¹⁴, ancient sources remain less than explicit on the specific cooking equipment used for the latter. As such, our unorthodox *chytra* might well lift a corner of the veil about it.

Moreover, a bobbin-shaped spirally-ribbed handle found in the same context most probably fits with a section of wide flaring rim of soot-coated frying pan of

⁶ ROTROFF 2006, p. 222, nrs. 836-837, fig. 97, pl. 90 (3rd and 2nd c. BC respectively).

⁷ It is particularly the case in Apicius, *De re coquinaria*, of whom no recipe at all is clearly referring to steam cooking.

⁸ ANNECHINO 1977, p. 109, tab. LI : 5. Moreover, the author also puts forward an alternative use « per cuocere una pietanza esotica, il cus-cus ». Another specimen of more closely *olla*-shaped *colum*, the bottom of which is regularly riddled with holes, but without the characteristic collar, might correspond to steam cooking pot as well (*ibid.*, fig. 1). See also BLANC 1992, p. 57, fig. 65.

⁹ CRAWFORD 1990, p. 85 : P62.366:4687, fig. 383 and 446.

¹⁰ *Il.* XI, 641. See also DALBY & GRAINGER 2000, p. 40-41 ; DELATTE 1955.

¹¹ BATS 1988, p. 33-37.

¹² Of which, incidentally, Arcestratos praised the one from Lesbian Eressos (fgt. 5 = ATHENAEUS 3, 11^e-112b) ; OLSON & SENS 2000, p. 27.

¹³ DIET, XL, 3.

¹⁴ OLSON & SENS, p. LIII.

widespread *tagenon* type (here referenced type I, see catalog *infra*) (Fig. 6a-b)¹⁵.

From the same context too, one last cooking pot arouses attention, viz. another fragmentary frying pan, alias *tagenon* – or rather oven plate, considering its size, also overfired and partly soot-coated (Fig. 7a-b). Both deeper and thicker walled, the shape (here referenced type II) combines an echinus rim with slightly inward bevelled edge and a bowl with recessed floor panel outlined around by a neatly indented line. The fact that the bevelled edge of the rim remained free of soot-coating might suggest that the vessel was supporting another one ; that it would conversely be a lid appears unlikely, considering the thick soot-coating of the inside of the bowl. Very similar pieces of Late Hellenistic date have been reported in Ephesus¹⁶ as well as related ones from the Athenian Agora¹⁷ and Corinth¹⁸.

The last piece of our cooking set consists of a small fragment of brazier or cooking stand (Fig. 8a-b), viz. a rim section with loop handle attachment upward and lug break (or pad ?) inside rim. Its diameter could well have supported a medium sized casserole. The outside appears much less soot furred than the cooking pots. Seemingly closely similar objects were found from the Agora¹⁹. The shape was probably a fairly deep one (horseshoe cooking stand?). In any case, it was really too small for heating any normal-sized cooking pot, all the more between vertical loop handles.

Though scanty, the pottery assemblage (West Slope, Lagynos style and ESA) as well as a fragmentary transport amphora of Rhodian type, ascribable to the Dramont shipwreck « horn handled » variant, provide an approximate dating centered on the interval mid 2nd c. BC / mid 1st c. AD (Fig. 9a-b)²⁰. Though not of Rhodian origin, judging from its chemical pattern, this amphora seems rather ascribable to the Cnidian peninsula, more exactly to the Daçca/Reşadiye area, thus providing us a *terminus ante quem* for our set of cooking vessels at the very dawn of the Rhodian peraea.

Summing up, the study of this cooking set from Late Hellenistic-Early Roman at Mytilene somewhat unexpectedly enriches our knowledge of ancient Greek cooking, first of all thanks to the advanced pattern of *chytra*, obviously intended for steam-cooking or, at least, double-boiling, at the disposal of Lesbian gastronomy for specific recipes still to uncover.

Before closing this paper, we still have to wonder about the keen question of the place of manufacture of that assemblage of cooking vessels. Rather than as

¹⁵ As attested among the finds from Ephesus : LADSTÄTTER 2005, Taf. 162 K 246 ; 182 K 637-K 638 (dated 220-230 AD). But the shape is also to be found on Lesbos itself among the finds from Methymna : LAMB 1932, p. 8, fig. 9 : 16. BUCHHOLZ 1975, p. 116-117, Fig. 33a-c. It is ascribable to pan 7 type of the Athenian Agora, see ROTROFF 2015, p. 186, fig. 16.6, of earlier period (4th – 3rd century BC).

¹⁶ LADSTÄTTER 2005, p. 291 K 250-K 252, pl. 162 (1st c. BC-1st c. AD).

¹⁷ ROTROFF 2006, p. 188-194, 237 chart 34, fig. 87 esp. nrs. 690-691 , pl. 71 (mid 3rd-late 1st c. BC).

¹⁸ EDWARDS 1975, p. 128, nr. 686, pl. 30 (mid 1st c. BC).

¹⁹ ROTROFF 2006, p. 220-221, nrs. 823-827, fig. 96 ; p. 223 nr. 846, fig. 97, pl. 90 (Late Hellenistic context).

²⁰ EMPEREUR & HESNARD 1987, p. 60, fig. 60, pl. 3 : 1st c. AD.

imports, they are most probably to be considered as local products, considering the various available clay sources of the island suitable for making fireproof pots and cooking requisites, still exploited by the last specialized potters' workshops in Madamados-Aghios Stefanos and Akrotiri²¹.

CATALOGUE

Chytra (Figs. 1-4).

Field reg. Myt 87 II.QR. 37, L 5, P. 105. 29.06.1987.

Ø rim 13 ; pres. H. 13 ; h. neck 2.5 ; Ø max : 22 (body) / 26.6 (collar).

Loose-textured reddish brown clay with grey core, light grey inside, soot-coated outside, very micaceous, with limestone inclusions.

Fragmentary upper part of lidded chytra. Vertical rim with thin projecting flange. Short neck with little gutter at junction with shoulder. Rounded shoulder. Thick peripheral flange with fold down rim, attached at body's maximum diameter level. Straight outlined lower body.

Teganon type I (Fig. 6a-b)

Field reg. Myt 87 II, QR 37, L. 5, P. 105, 29.06.87

Rim Ø ca. 23 ; bottom Ø ca. 20 ; H. 4 ; Ø handle socket 5.3

Dark brown fabric, loose-textured, slightly gritty, porous, soot-coated inside bowl.

Inner surface smoothed, bottom and exterior rougher treated ; plain rounded rim; flat base ; spiral ribbed bobbin-ended handle slopping from rim.

HAYES 2009, p. 11, 32, figs. 47, 181; BUCHHOLZ 1975, p. 116-117 Fig. 33a-c (from Methymna).

Taganon type II (Fig. 7a-b)

Field reg. Myt 87 II, QR 37, L. 5, P. 105, 29.06.87

Ø rim ca. 27 ; preserv. H. 3.8

Lightbrown porous sandy fabric. Weathered surface. Completely soot-coated inside bowl as well as around the exterior of rim (except around the bevelled edge of rim).

Four joining fragments of shallowly rounded bowl with inside bevelled edge of rim and recessed floor panel.

Brazier (Fig. 8a-b)

Field reg. Myt 87 II, QR 37, L. 5, P. 105, 29.06.87

Estim. rim Ø ca. 17

Gritty orange clay with lime inclusions. Slightly soot-coated outside, darker inside.

Rim fragment with lug attachment inside and double stub on top, probably corresponding to a broken vertical loop handle.

²¹ HAMPE & WINTER 1965, p. 147-151.

Amphora of Rhodian type. (Fig. 9a-b).

Field reg. Myt 87 II.QR. 37, L 5P. 105. 29.06.1987

Ø 13, H. 77, (?), Ø Max. 24 cm, Ø handle 3,6 x 3,4.

Buff reddish fabric, fine, limestone inclusions, yellow slip outside ; plain rounded rim, high neck, round handles arching from upper neck down to mid shoulder ; slim spindle-shaped body.

EMPEREUR & HESNARD 1987, p. 60, fig. 60, pl. 3: 1st c. AD.

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Fig. 1 : Chytra. Flanged rim, neck & belly fragments.



Fig. 2 : Chytra. Section of peripheral collar with groove underside.



Fig. 3 : Chytra. Peripheral collar *in situ*.

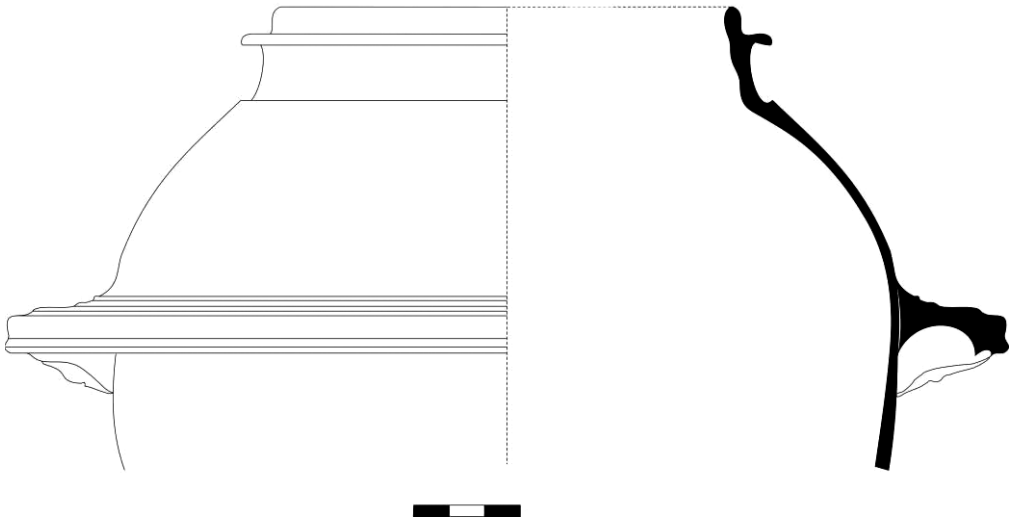


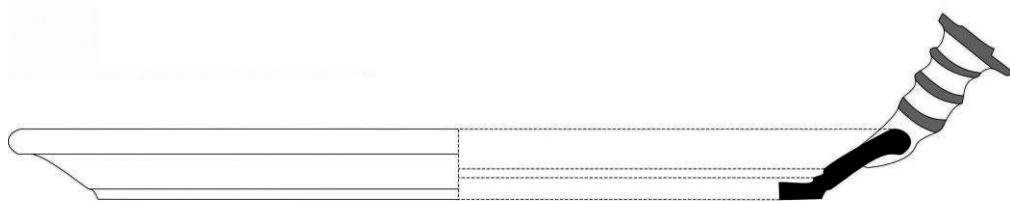
Fig. 4 : Chytra. Peripheral collar. Profile drawing.



Fig. 5 : « Colum » from Pompei (after Annechino 1977).



a.



b.

Fig. 6a-b : *Tagenon type I*. Section of rim and handle.



a.



b.

Fig. 7a-b : *Tagenon* type II. *Pan Form 6-Rotroff*: orlo bifido *Pan*. Section of body.



a.



b.

Fig. 8a-b: Brazier.
Rim section with loop handle attachment & lug break inside rim.

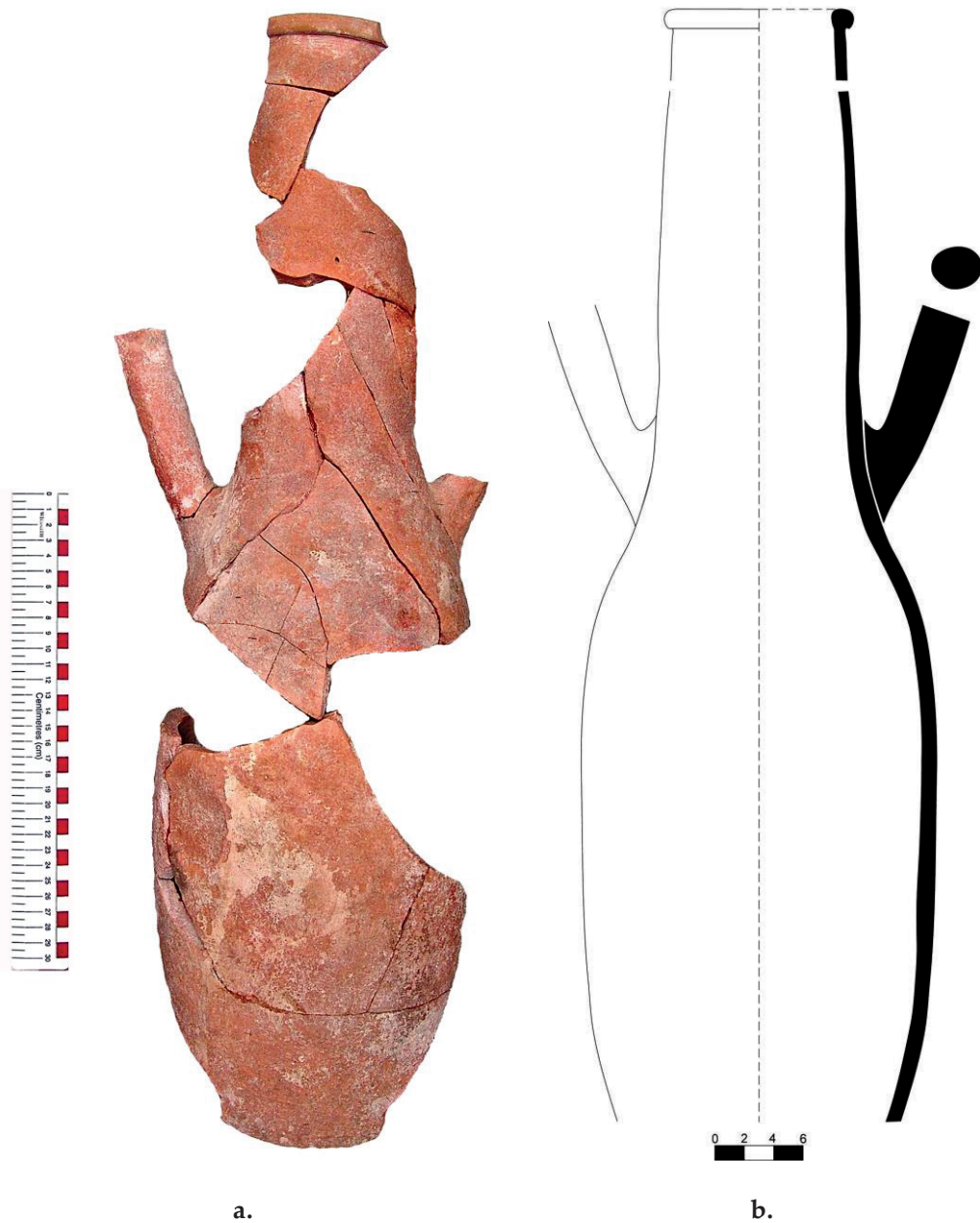


Fig. 9a-b: Amphora of Rhodian type (1st c. AD).