

Introduction

Mediterranean Farming between Longue Durée and Contingency

For the last 8000–10000 years, the peoples of the Mediterranean have overwhelmingly subsisted on cultivated plants and domestic animals. Historians and archaeologists have studied ancient farming for insight into changing economy, society, and landscape, but available evidence has significant limitations. Literary sources assume much background knowledge and, to varying degrees, address moralizing or romantic content to elite readers. Iconography is selective and poses problems of distinguishing normal practice from rare innovations or fantasy. More mundane archaeological evidence (tools, seeds, bones) is potentially more representative and socially inclusive but provides ambiguous traces of many practices, a fragmentary picture of farming regimes, and at best circumstantial insight into why people farmed in particular ways. Scholars have drawn extensively on recent “traditional” (nonmechanized, pre-industrial) farming, therefore, to infer uses of tools (e.g., Byzantine digging implements – Bryer, 1986), practices (e.g., Roman harvesting

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methods – Spurr, 1986), land-use regimes (e.g., Bronze Age cereal–olive–vine polyculture – Renfrew, 1972), or production parameters (e.g., area yields for classical Greek grain crops – Gallant, 1991) for which direct evidence is lacking or ambiguous and to identify likely rationales for documented practices (e.g., nonspecialized, classical Greek oil- and wine-processing facilities reflecting limited production for market – Foxhall, 2007).

Many accounts of traditional Mediterranean farming overgeneralize, however, or conversely highlight local customs, and few explore the balance between “practical” and “cultural” influence on methods. Moreover, detailed studies of particular aspects (e.g., tillage, reaping) may obscure the extent to which decisions shape outcomes and choices at subsequent stages of the agricultural cycle. The *relevance* of traditional farming to the past also requires critical consideration. Emphasis on relatively *timeless* constraints (e.g., Semple, 1932; Blanchard, 1945; Grigg, 1974; Braudel, 1975) of environment (e.g., low rainfall), technology (e.g., “primitive” wooden plows) and perhaps know-how (e.g., presumed ignorance of crop rotation) has encouraged uncritical extrapolation to antiquity. Traditional practice was highly variable, however, and demonstrably shaped also by medium-term historical contingencies (e.g., land tenure, markets – Silverman, 1968; Halstead, 1987; Forbes, 1993) and cultural preferences and by short-term tactical decision-making. These influences must be disentangled to enable judicious use of recent practices as analogies for the past.

This study attempts an overview of traditional Mediterranean farming practice and a critical evaluation of its potential to illuminate ancient farming. It explores what recent farmers did and how, why, and with what consequences. For reasons of space, it concentrates on staple Old World grain crops, dealing briefly with fruit, fiber, oil and vegetable crops (primarily where relevant to farmers’ overall cropping decisions and rotation practices), and livestock (primarily as aids to or beneficiaries of arable farming). Geographically, it focuses on Greece, with patchier coverage of the northwest and eastern Mediterranean to encompass greater ecological and cultural diversity; inclusion of upland Asturias on

the Atlantic façade of northwest Spain, characterized by wet summers, offers a useful contrast with typically Mediterranean regions of mild, rainy winters and hot, dry summers.

Evidence is drawn partly from published agronomic, ethnographic, and folkloric studies but in large measure from firsthand observations and oral-historical accounts, because this makes accessible a substantial body of original information and facilitates contextualized exploration of farmers' decisions. These observations and oral histories were collected over four decades in Spain, southern France, Italy, Cyprus, and especially Greece (Figure 1.1). Much of this information is a by-product of ethnoarchaeological projects, investigating whether particular farming practices leave distinctive material traces: crop processing in the Greek islands (Jones, 1984); irrigation in northern Spain (Jones *et al.*, 1995); intensive "gardening" of pulses in central Greece (Jones *et al.*, 1999) and cereals in Asturias (Charles *et al.*, 2002); extensive einkorn growing in Provence; and woodland management in northwest Greece (Halstead and Tierney, 1998; Smith, 1998). Much has also been gathered during archaeological fieldwork in Greece, with subject matter depending on local land use, informants' experiences, and my evolving interests.

1.1 Fieldwork

Many interviewees expressed delight at finding someone interested in their experiences. A farmer on the Greek island of Amorgos solicited questions to prolong breaks in the *kafenío*, while his son sweated on the threshing floor. One May in Khionades on the mountainous Greek–Albanian border, a blind woman of 85 initiated conversation from behind closed shutters. She had outlived her husband, siblings, and children and, other than periodic shouted exchanges with a housebound neighbor, I was her first social contact since the previous summer. In northern Greek Assiros, the neighborhood grandmothers regularly invited me for morning coffee, entertaining me (and themselves) with half-forgotten dialect words and customs

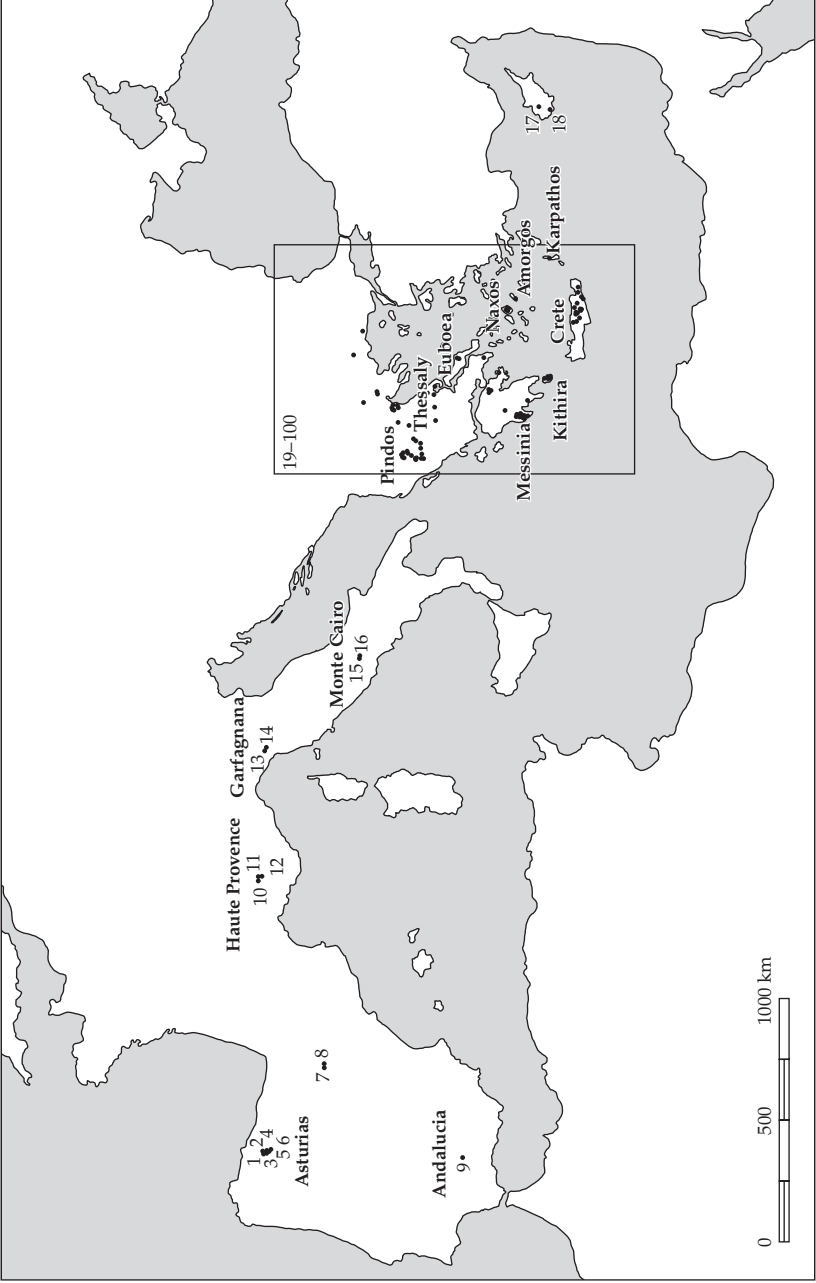




Figure 1.1 Map of Mediterranean Europe, showing locations described by informants. Key: 1. Zureda, 2. Tiós, 3. Xomezana, 4. Carraluz, 5. Piñera, 6. Llanos de Somerón, 7. Ambel, 8. Borja, 9. Zuheros, 10. Mollans-sur-Ouvèze, 11. Brantes, 12. Sault, 13. Piazza al Serchio, 14. Castiglione di Garfagnana,

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or embarrassing stories about male villagers. Conversely, some individuals were reluctant to recall grinding poverty or civil war. Others were wary of a stranger but perhaps relented on seeing friendly exchanges with neighbors. As an outsider, being foreign was sometimes advantageous in that curiosity was attributed to eccentricity or ignorance rather than official snooping. Once, mention of an émigré mutual acquaintance, who had not written home for months, proved difficult, but normally introductions from an insider greatly eased information gathering. Frustratingly, women carers occasionally limited access to housebound individuals, out of embarrassment for their decrepitude, misplaced concern that they would bore me, or fear of their revealing family secrets – often already heard from neighbors.

Ethnoarchaeological projects, involving systematic sampling of plant or animal specimens from fields, threshing floors, and barns, required completion of standardized questionnaires, but most “interviews” defied close control. In the mountains of northwest Greece, a Vlach herder and anthropologist’s father had firm ideas

Figure 1.1 (Cont’d) 15. Casalattico, 16. Monforte, 17. Gerakies, 18. Kouklia, 19. Neo Sidirokhori, 20. Prasinada, 21. Mouries, 22. Lazarades, 23. Skafi, 24. Assiros, 25. Mavrorakhi, 26. Kastania, 27. Kolindros, 28. Paliambela, 29. Aiginio, 30. Kitros, 31. Nea Trapezounta, 32. Agia Paraskevi, 33. Aetomilitsa, 34. Fourka, 35. Khionades, 36. Likorakhi, 37. Pigi, 38. Plikati, 39. Agios Minas, 40. Aristi, 41. Dikorfo, 42. Mavrovouni, 43. Ligopsa, 44. Zitsa, 45. Metsovo, 46. Kipourio, 47. Kranea, 48. Kanalia, 49. Prodromos, 50. Sesklo, 51. Vizitsa, 52. Zoodokhos Pigi, 53. Manikia, 54. Tharounia, 55. Markopoulo, 56. Arkhaia Nemea, 57. Dervenakia, 58. Methana, 59. Mikines, 60. Karitaina, 61. Asoutaina, 62. Iklaina, 63. Khora, 64. Kinigou, 65. Kontogoni, 66. Korifasio, 67. Makraina, 68. Metaxada, 69. Milioti, 70. Palaio Loutro, 71. Potamia, 72. Tragana, 73. Stoupa, 74. Aroniadika, 75. Frilingianika, 76. Kastrianika, 77. Mitata, 78. Potamos, 79. Filoti, 80. Kourounokhori, 81. Melanes, 82. Potamia, 83. Kolofana, 84. Agia Semni, 85. Aloides, 86. Ano Asites, 87. Anogia, 88. Arkalokhori, 89. Arkhanes, 90. Kalo Khorio, 91. Knossos, 92. Miliarisi, 93. Skalani, 94. Pinakiano (Lasithi plateau), 95. Anatoli, 96. Mirtos, 97. Pakhia Ammos, 98. Stavrokhori, 99. Vasiliki, 100. Olimbos.

on note-taking (“that is important, write it down”). Some informants overestimated my interest in warfare (men) and miraculous icons (women), but often such lack of discipline proved invaluable, because my questions reflected the limits of my understanding and the most revealing “answers” were unsolicited.

The words of Mediterranean farmers, like those of academics, cannot be treated uncritically. Sometimes participant observation provided a check and, wherever possible, multiple oral sources were compared. Once, a recent interviewee reacted angrily to my asking his neighbor the same questions, but most informants seemingly attributed such behavior to slow learning. While conversations with one person at home were easiest to follow, group discussions, as with the old men outside the cobbler’s workshop in Assiros, revealed who embroidered their experiences – for dramatic effect or in a misguided attempt to be helpful. It was often clear from context whether answers were pessimistic (“life was hard in the old days”) or optimistic (“I had the best-fed and most powerful oxen in the village”), and generalizations were easier to evaluate when leavened with specific examples (“in 1934, when it did not rain from October 18 to March 18, we only harvested 20 loads of wheat”), the accuracy of which was often confirmed by other informants. A common response to questions, as Binford found among the Nunamiut, was “it depends” (Binford, 1978; also Forbes, 1992, 92), and the contingent nature of decisions and their outcomes accounts for many apparent discrepancies between informants. Thanks to the close interest that Mediterranean farmers take (for sound reasons – Section 7.4) in neighbors’ activities, informants could often identify differences of needs or means that might account for such discrepancies.

Given the rapid pace of technological, economic, political, and social change in the twentieth-century Mediterranean, it is essential to establish a chronological framework for oral histories – despite the tendency of elderly informants to use “recently,” “the year before last,” or even “the day before yesterday” to refer to events 50 or 60 years ago. A positive consequence of this logarithmic perception of time is that informants’ memories focus on adolescence and early adulthood rather than providing a pastiche of experiences

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throughout their lifetimes. Informants in their 90s and occasional centenarians thus provided vivid firsthand accounts of life near the beginning of the twentieth century, even if they could not remember breakfast on the day of interview. Indeed, one 90-year-old, close as a teenager to a centenarian grandfather, provided oral history reaching back in two steps to the early nineteenth century. The building of oral histories with time depth from informants of successive generations is invaluable in revealing how “traditional” agricultural practices have altered with changing circumstances. Fortunately, most informants distinguished readily between experiences as members of their parental household and subsequently as independent householders. Women especially linked experiences to the life cycles of close kin (“I was breast-feeding my son when we first harvested that field”) and could recall or calculate dates of births, marriages, and deaths. Men routinely recalled whether experiences pre- or postdated military service or work abroad. For both men and women, war and civil unrest provided indelible temporal signposts. Insofar as interviews could be stage managed, therefore, the first step was to establish a potted biography for the informant, identifying areas of firsthand expertise and events (marriage, military service) that could date experiences.

1.2 Scales of Analysis

Variability in traditional farming is explored in turn through the *annual* cycle of grain production, from tillage and sowing (Chapter 2) to harvest (Chapter 3) and processing for storage or consumption (Chapter 4); then the *interannual* cycle of practices such as crop rotation and manuring (Chapter 5); and finally the *generational* cycle of shifting balance between households’ consumption needs and available labor, land, and livestock (Chapter 6). Attention is drawn to how decisions on a generational and interannual scale inform those taken during the annual crop production cycle and how the latter shape choices at subsequent stages of this cycle. Diversity of practice is explored in terms of *cultural* “ways of doing” and *practical* adjustment to

circumstances, the latter on timescales ranging from the timeless *longue durée* through the medium-term *conjoncture* to the short-term *événement* of Braudel (1975). Each chapter examines the contexts and consequences of alternative practices (e.g., tillage with hoe or plow, yoking of oxen or cows), offers order-of-magnitude estimates of costs and benefits (e.g., speed of tillage or reaping, fodder requirements of draft animals), and suggests how this information might shed light on ancient Mediterranean farming, drawing examples from the earliest Neolithic to Greco-Roman antiquity. Although largely dealing with very practical matters, much of this book is concerned with human decision-making. Chapter 7, therefore, discusses how traditional Mediterranean farmers acquired information and skills, how they made decisions, and the extent to which they were rational actors making predictable choices, before assessing the potential of traditional farming to provide relevant and illuminating analogies for the distant past. Because traditional farming was not timeless, the temptation will be resisted to write agricultural history just from recent analogy.

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