

Peopling the Past Video 2: Bronze Age Cookpots with Mara Horowitz

Transcript

Video begins with instrumental music played over the title card which reads "Peopling the Past"

We hear Mara Horowitz Speak: "Hi, my name is Mara Horowitz. I'm an archaeologist at Purchase College of the State University of New York and welcome to Peopling the Past."

There is a woman wearing glasses and a black bandana on her head, sitting, facing the camera. There is a white couch behind her. The PowerPoint slide shows the Peopling the Past logo.

Horowitz: "What topic are you talking about today?" I'm talking about cookpots and daily life in the ancient bronze age cultures of Cyprus, southern Turkey, and northwest Syria. That's from three to five thousand years ago. Cookpots are made of clay and were very common in the ancient world because metal was expensive. And not often used for making pots and pans. In order to make a clay pot that would stand up to heat special steps had to be taken and special material used. Ancient people prepared food every day of their lives. Their cookpots give us their lived experience. That begins with simple practicalities and works up to larger inferences about local history. Daily life was affected by many factors including culture, social status and wealth, wars, imperial management, and climate change. Looking at the humble remains of daily life such as cookpots can give us clues to how those factors were affecting ordinary people in the past."

The slide shows the Neumagen Relief, which is a late Roman tomb sculpture that shows a school scene with pupils and a teacher. The text reads "What topic are you talking about today?"

Horowitz: "The research questions I ask are: how are the daily lives of ancient people reflected in their household objects like cookpots? What might cause changes in cookpot form and materials such as changes in diet, technology, or culture? When cookpots change are we seeing the

effects of war, imperialism, assimilation, or climate change? Can we reconstruct a historical narrative using cookpots.”

Slide shows a collection of whole and partially broken pots in light beige to red colours. The text on the screen was read out by Horowitz.

Horowitz: "What sources or data do you look at?" First the shape and size of cookpots, then the clay and added grits they were made from. We call that the fabric. Grits were added to the clay to make the pots stronger and able to withstand the heat of cooking. When I looked at cookpots from the Amuq Valley in southern Turkey I found that they were made of red clay with crushed calcite in the Middle Bronze Age, and pale clay with crushed shell in the Late Bronze Age. That's quite a significant change. It means that potters changed the clay they used and changed the grits they like to add. I also look at the contexts in which cookpots are found I discovered that after a long period of stability in the Middle Bronze Age, there are four successive destruction layers with human casualties in the transition to the Late Bronze Age. Historical records are few for this time but can be helpful. Records from the Hittite and Egyptian empires both mention attacking sites in the region in this transitional period. I also look at scientific data. For example, evidence was found from pollen in sediment layers at the bottom of local lakes. Scientists drilled core samples from those layers and the results showed a major drying trend in the region during this transitional time. Study of animal bones showed that during the transitional years there was a sudden spike in wild animal bones in local trash instead of the usual barnyard animal bones. That means the people had to hunt for food instead of relying on their flocks.”

The slide shows three images. On the left is a statue in stone of a seated scribe from ancient Egypt. In the center is a cuneiform clay tablet from Mesopotamia. On the right is a wall painting from Pompeii known as the Sappho Tondo. Though it does not depict the famous author, it shows the portrait of a well-dressed woman with a writing utensil poised to her lip. The text on the slide reads “What sources or data do you look at?”

Horowitz: “First the relative size of a cookpot indicates the size of a household being fed. Some cultures have smaller cookpots overall and may be making sauces rather than whole dishes like stew or porridge. This is the case on Bronze Age Cyprus and Greece. On the Eastern Mediterranean

mainland cookpots were larger even for small households, while in palaces they were enormous and could fit a whole lamb inside them. Second the choice of clay and added grits indicates cultural and technological tradition handed down from potter to apprentice across generations. It also tells us about access to raw materials in the landscape and in some cases also diet. Let's explore how clay inclusions can indicate diet."

Slide shows four images. On the left is a Greek marble grave stele of a little girl holding a bird. To the right of this is a Greek vase painting scene that shows women weaving at a loom. To the right of that are model figures of bakers preparing and baking bread from ancient Egypt. On the right is a painted "mummy portrait" of a young man from the Fayum in Egypt. The text reads "How can this topic or material tell us about real people in the past?"

Horowitz: "Experimental work is where archaeologists try out ancient methods and materials. I used experiments to explore whether the crushed shells added to clay for cookpots came from diet. Experiments in heating the shells before crushing them revealed different fracture patterns in raw shells versus heated ones. We concluded that the shells crushed for pottery had been heated to a temperature typical of boiling and steaming. Since this change in added grits took place at the transition from Middle to Late Bronze, at the time when destructions were frequent and wild animal bones were more common, it may mean that local people were eating fresh-water mussels because times were hard and their usual food was scarce. This was probably due to the wars and looting and could also have been due to the drought that scientists have identified at that time."

Across the bottom of the slide are three images. The left image the forming of a clay pot in close up, with hands forming a large open vessel. The middle image an open flame with burn marks around the outside of the container. The right image shows broken fragments of clay cookpots on the ground as found by excavations. The title of the slide is "Experimental Work," and the text in bullet points reads: "Lab tests indicated shells were heated (boiled) before crushing. Suggests they were consumed before using shells in pottery. Shellfish became a significant part of the local diet at the transition from Middle to Late Bronze Age—why?"

Horowitz: "To recreate ancient cookpots is the best way to test our theories for how they were made and used. I crushed these freshwater shells using a grindstone just like the ancient people. Then I mixed this clay with the crushed shells and sand and formed it into a pot. I discovered when I put the clay on the pottery wheel that the crushed shells are super sharp so they must have used wooden tools to shape the pot. Once fired these cookpots will be used to try cooking liquid foods as well as steaming or boiling fresh mussels. I'll try cooking my own dinner in the pots to see how they work. Hopefully these experiments will continue to help us understand how people in the past made their pots and cooked their food."

This slide shows images representing the process of recreating ancient cookpots. On the top left is an image of a completed cookpot being used for experimental cooking. Below that are images of a grindstone, as well as whole and crushed shells used as grits in the clay. In the center is a large flat piece of unformed clay. On the right is an image of a fully formed cookpot before the firing process. The slide title reads: "Experiment: Making a Cookpot". The text below reads: "trying out different methods of cooking is the best way to learn the capabilities of ancient cookpots."

Horowitz: "Thanks for watching. To find out more check out peopleinthepast.com."

Instrumental music plays. The last slide shows the credits for this episode:

Video Content and Narration: Mara Horowitz

Video Editing and Captioning: Christine Johnston, Twitter @archaeologist

Intro Music: Marika Papagika, Kremetai I Kapota (Free Music Archive, CC BY-NC-ND 3.0)

Peopling the Past Logo: Caitlin Mostoway Parker, Instagram @artbycaitlinmp

Question Card Images:

- Neumagen Relief, Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier, inv. 29656302165 (Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)
- Nikare scribe state, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 48.67 (CCO 1.0)
- Cuneiform tablet with lawsuit, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 66.245.5b (CCO 1.0)
- Sappho Tondo, National Archaeological Museum of Naples, inv. 9084 (Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)

- Greek marble grave stele of a little girl, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 27.45 (CCO 1.0)
- Greek lekythos with weavers, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 31.11.10 (CCO 1.0)
- Models of bakers and brewers, Tomb of Meketre, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 20.3.12-BAKERS (CCO 1.0)
- Fayum Portrait of a Youth, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 09.181.4 (CCO 1.0)

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