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Edited by
Paolo Matthiae, Frances Pinnock, Lorenzo Nigro
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THE USE OF PLANTS IN A RITUAL WELL AT EBLA (TELL MARDIKH) - NORTH-WESTERN SYRIA

GIROLAMO FIORENTINO, VALENTINA CARACUTA

He breaks and scattered one *la 'tu* bread cake upon
the sacrificial table.
Twice, he offers the bowl (with food);
twice, he empties the libation globet with beer
into the *kirru*-vat...
(Ritual KAR 139)¹

ABSTRACT

The discovery of a deep votive well full of pottery, idols of clay, animal bones and charred plant remains, along the wall of the Temple of Rock at Ebla, opened new perspectives in the study of worship activities held in that particular areas. Plant remains were considered as privileged interpretative tools, and careful attention was taken during the collection of samples. Therefore, the investigation started characterizing the different depositional episodes: the ritual fuel discharging was distinguished from the deposition of charred materials in pots. As result, the identification of plant remains collected led to shed light on the type and the geographical origin of the archaeobotanical assemblage as well the meaning assumed by vegetal components in rituals.

INTRODUCTION

The discovery of a deep bipartite-well (TM.05.HHS F.9308/F.9301) full of pottery, clay figurines, animal bones and charred plant remains, along the wall of the Temple of Rock at Ebla, raised new questions on the type of activities which connoted the area during the Middle Bronze Age.

Considering the importance of these particular kind of “material”, special attention was paid to the context of finding because the symbolic meaning of artefacts,² as well as ecofacts,³ is usually bounded within the context.

The collocation of the well, strictly related to the temple, as well as the simultaneous presence of miniaturized pots, clay ‘idols’, residues of slaughtering and hearths remains, backed up the idea that the well was a votive pit likely connected with the

1 Oppenheim 1966.

2 Hodder 2000.

3 Fiorentino, Solinas *in press*.

religious activities held in the sanctuary area.⁴

Since the identification of early cult practices from the archaeological record is a challenging task and the analysis of the belief system which sustains them an even more difficult problem,⁵ the characterization of Eblaitic rituals activities would have required a careful analysis which had entailed the study of all the cultural remains found in the well.

Nevertheless, conscious of these limits, we attempted to define the pattern of plant use in Ebla ritual contexts through the identification of charcoals and seeds/fruits here found.

THE ARCHAEOBOTANICAL ANALYSIS OF TM.05.HHS P.9308

Methods and Material

All the charred plant remains were collected in that portion of the bipartite-well labelled P.9308, during the field excavations carried out by the archaeological mission of Roma "La Sapienza", between the 2004 and 2006 campaigns.

The analysed portion of the well was full of charred remains, which entered into the deposit as discarded or burnt material as well as offering in the miniaturized pots thrown into the well.

The analysis of the archaeobotanical remains regarded both these kind of contexts, until seventy-eight specimens of sediment were collected and floated by means of 4 mm and 0,5 mm meshes. In all, seven-hundred and eighty-six samples of wood tissue and thirty-seven carporemaines were selected (Fig. 1) and identified using stereoscopic and metallographic microscopes (magnification from 10X to 200X).

Results

The archaeobotanical analysis has revealed that the most part of the charcoal assemblage was characterized by: *Olea europaea* (273), *Quercus* cfr. *boissieri* (204), *Quercus* cfr. *ithaburensis* (110) together with *Prunus avium* (wild cherry tree) (63), *Prunus dulcis* (almond tree) (31) and *Pistacia vera* (pistachio) (39). While *Quercus* cfr. *calliprinos* (25), *Pistacia khinjuk* (7), *Ulmaceae* (8), *Capparis* sp. (5), *Fraxinus* sp. (2), *Phillyrea* (4), *Cedrus* sp. (2), *Cupressus* sp. (1), *Pinus sylvestris* type (2), *Pinus pinea/halepensis* type (3), were scarcely represented (Fig. 3). Within the thirty-seven carporemaines, the majority was made by caryopses of *Triticum aestivum/compactum* (10), *Triticum* sp. (2), *Hordeum vulgare* (9) *Hordeum distichum* (1). Olive stones were fairly attested, as well as legumes (*Lens* sp., *Pisum sativum* and *Vicia ervilia*) (Fig. 2).

Almost the total amount of carporemaines was found in miniaturized pots together with a great deal of charcoals (Fig. 4). It is fairly certain, that carporemaines were

4 Matthiae *pers.comm.*

5 Renfrew 1994.

put in pots as votive offering, while the associated anthracoremaines might have been intentionally laid or they might have slipped into the pots after the discarded of hearth debris.

It is noteworthy that the greatest variability in number of taxa occurred in hearths: woods of *Capparis* sp., Ulmaceae, *Fraxinus* sp. and *Quercus calliprinos* were never found in pots since they were exclusively used as fuel in sacred fires.

As far as concern essences in pots, they were almost the same found in hearth debris, the only exception were the alloctonal species of *Pistacia khinjuk* and *Phillyrea*, whose attestation were limited to pots TM.06.HHS.1150/6-7 (Fig. 5).

Discussion

All the carporemaines found in the votive well P.9308 represent the base of the Ebla food-habits since they have been already found in MBA domestic contexts⁶ (kitchen, refusal pits, tannur etc.) and also mentioned in the EBA cuneiform tablets as part and parcel of the royal and the workers diet.⁷ Since no documentary sources for the Middle Bronze Age were available, we assumed that the EBA information could have been of a certain utility in interpreting the MBA pattern.

Cereals can be likely considered the base of the Eblaitic food-habits: barley, emmer and wheat are the most attested taxa in the administrative documents since they are often mentioned as part of the food rations addressed to the royal family, bureaucracy and common workers of Palace.⁸

A worship use of cereals comes out from the Ebla EBA archives which contains some documents which record monthly rations of cereals addressed, in occasion of a particular festivity, to the king, his son, the queen, princes and princesses of the royal court and to a good deal of workers. Different from common rations, which were always in form of cereals, that particular type was in form of half-finished product (flour) or bread and cakes⁹.

While emmer and wheat were used primarily for baking, barley was employed in brewing¹⁰ as well in mud-brick manufacturing.¹¹ Grain farming was largely practiced following an extensive pattern which, without turning to irrigation systems, ensured only a modest production (four/five times the sowing ratio).¹² The cultivation of legumes seems to have played an important role in the Ebla economic system as well, since a great amount of *Vicia ervilia*, stored with barley and wheat, was found in a storehouse in the MBA quarter B-East.¹³

6 G. Fiorentino *interim* report.

7 Milano 1987.

8 Milano 1990; Archi 1999.

9 Milano 1989/90. Small slices of which has been identified as "charred bread" were laid in pots found in the ritual well TM.06.HHS P.9308.

10 Milano 2006a.

11 Cfr. fn. 6.

12 Cfr. fn. 11.

13 Cfr. fn. 6.

Together with cereals and legumes, the olive represent another important edible source: some olive stones were found in the domestic quarter B-East in a context identified as a kitchen, while a good deal was thrown as debris in a refusal pit discovered on the eastern rampart.

Furthermore, olive oil played an important role in rituals since it had been used as mean to consecrate special situation such as the royal marriage and alliances.¹⁴

Summarizing, all the edible annual fruits associated with pots have revealed a close connection with Ebla food-habits and worship actions as well.

The analysis of charcoal findings, at the opposite, has revealed a varied framework of use that leaved opened different interpretative pathways.¹⁵

With the exception of oaks wood, the most representative taxa, *Olea europaea*, *Prunus avium* (wild cherry tree), *Prunus dulcis* (almond tree) and *Pistacia vera* are fruit-tree whose growing had been likely practiced in the surrounding of the site. For olive-growing there are trustworthy clues that pointed to fields between Ariha and Idleb,¹⁶ while the absence of a specific accounting for the other fruit-trees make more difficult to appreciate their value in the ancient Eblaitic economic system.¹⁷ Nevertheless, comparisons with other epigraphic sources have revealed that fruit-growing was practiced both in orchards and in fields put under the administrative control of the state-power¹⁸; furthermore, the cultivation of a variety of trees in orchards is the best documented aspect of forestry in southern Babylonian texts.¹⁹ With regard to the use of *Prunus avium* at Ebla, recent archaeobotanical analysis has revealed that little furniture, as well as mixed wood-mother-of-pearl reliefs of EBA Royal Palace G, were made of wild cherry wood.

A local availability (natural and/or anthropic induced) can be claimed for these kind of essences, as well as for *Fraxinus* sp. which could have been collected on the banks of the nearby river Queiq, and *Capparis* sp., whose presence can result from the exploitation of steppic resources. At the opposite, an alloctonal provenience can be claimed for *Cedrus* sp. and *Cupressus* sp., since their importation is well attested both in northern Syria and in Mesopotamia.²⁰ The great estimation in which they were held, comes out from the utilisation they were intended to: their oil was used in perfumery²¹ and their wood in door manufacturing.²² Moreover cedar resin was used as incense in religious services²³ and it resulted to have been appreciated in carpentry as well, as attested also by the findings of charred beams and piles in the EBA Royal Palace G

14 Archi 1991.

15 In the following lines the interpretation of wood meaning will be done considering the whole timber and not a special part of it.

16 Cfr. fn. 13.

17 Milano 2006b.

18 Wiseman 1952; van Driel 1992; Postgate 1992; Powel 1992.

19 Van der Mieroop 1992.

20 Rowton 1967; Linder 1986.

21 Kupper 1992.

22 Serre-Bachet 1985; Postgate 1992.

23 Goetze 1968.

at Ebla.

Carpentry can be claimed as a major cause also for the different kind of oaks, since they substitute cedar in palatine building from MBA.²⁴ The old Babylonian texts refer also to the use of oak for chair manufacturing²⁵ while Assyrian texts mention the oak gall as important item in leather-working.²⁶

With regard to the other essences found in the votive well we can propose an utilisation of *Pinus sylvestris* type as well as *Pinus pinea/halepensis* type woods in furniture manufacturing since those same kinds have been found in MBA domestic context B-East. The use of other timbers such as *Pistacia khinjuk* and *Phillyrea* cannot be ascribed to any of the mentioned categories and so their interpretation is far from straightforward.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the vegetal component of the votive well P.9308 at Ebla has opened new perspectives in the study of the possible uses and meanings of wood and seeds/fruits in ritual contexts.

Comparison with other data, resulting from epigraphic sources and archaeobotanical analysis carried out in domestic and public contexts inside the site, has revealed that common edible seeds/fruits and wood can, occasionally, assume meanings which go beyond their daily use. Nevertheless, since the modern perception of ancient life-style concerns the problem of transferring the views of one culture to another,²⁷ the definition of the role of vegetal elements in ancient rituals is far from straightforward.

The contextualisation of archaeobotanical data, as well as the definition of all those associations which are relevant to understand its meaning,²⁸ should be viewed as a fundamental tasks for future researches.

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24 Fiorentino, Solinas 2008.

25 van De Mieroop 1992.

26 Postgate 1992.

27 Renfrew 1994; Ingold 2000; Nakamura 2004.

28 Hodder 2000.

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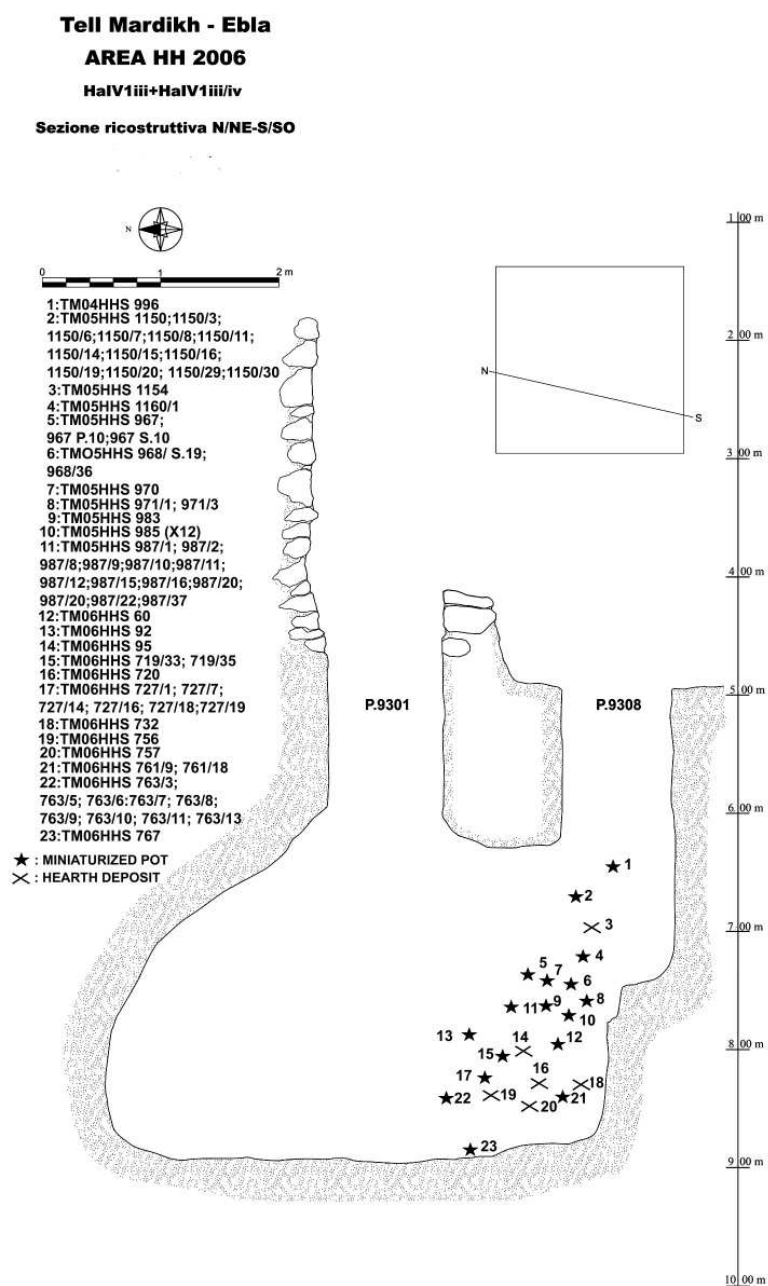


Fig. 1: The votive wells P.9308-P.9301: samples collocation.

Source: Redrawn after A. Enea and G. Marinelli.

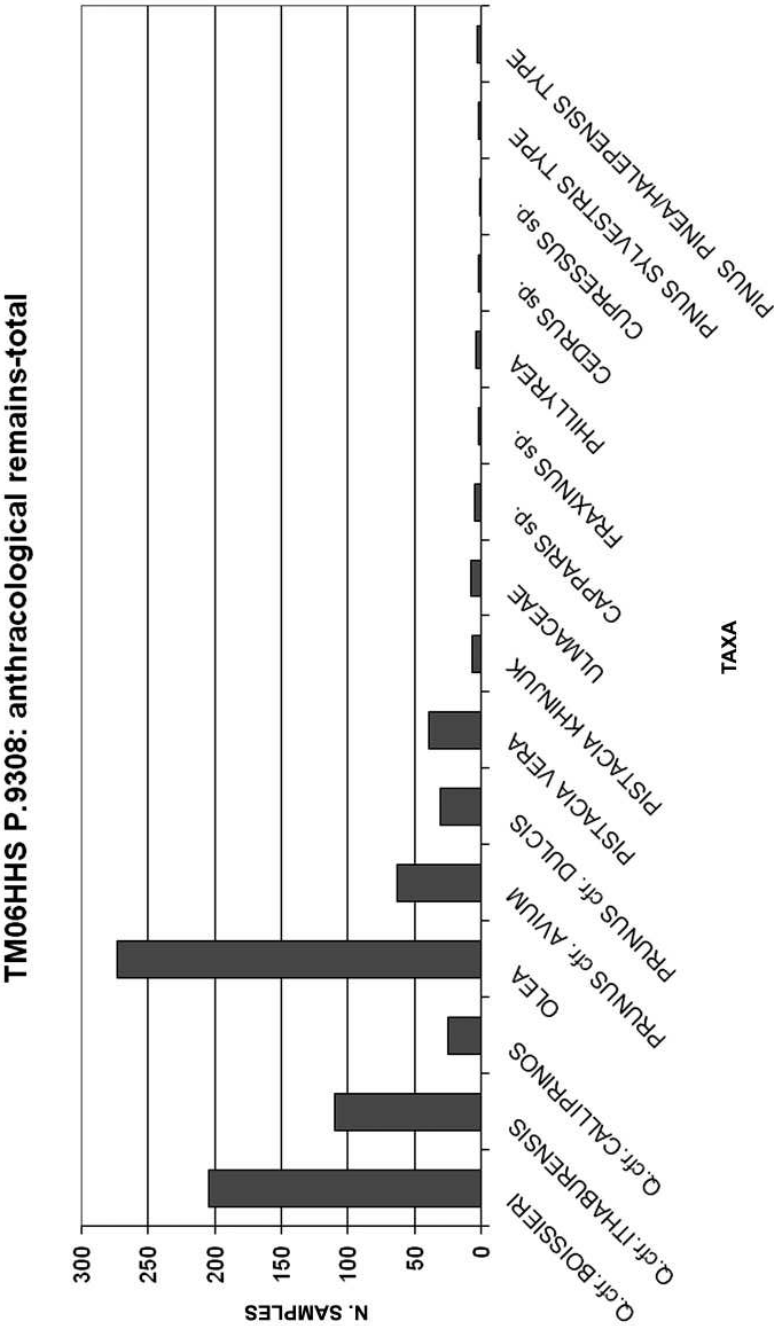


Fig. 2: The carpological assemblage in well TM06HHS P.9308.

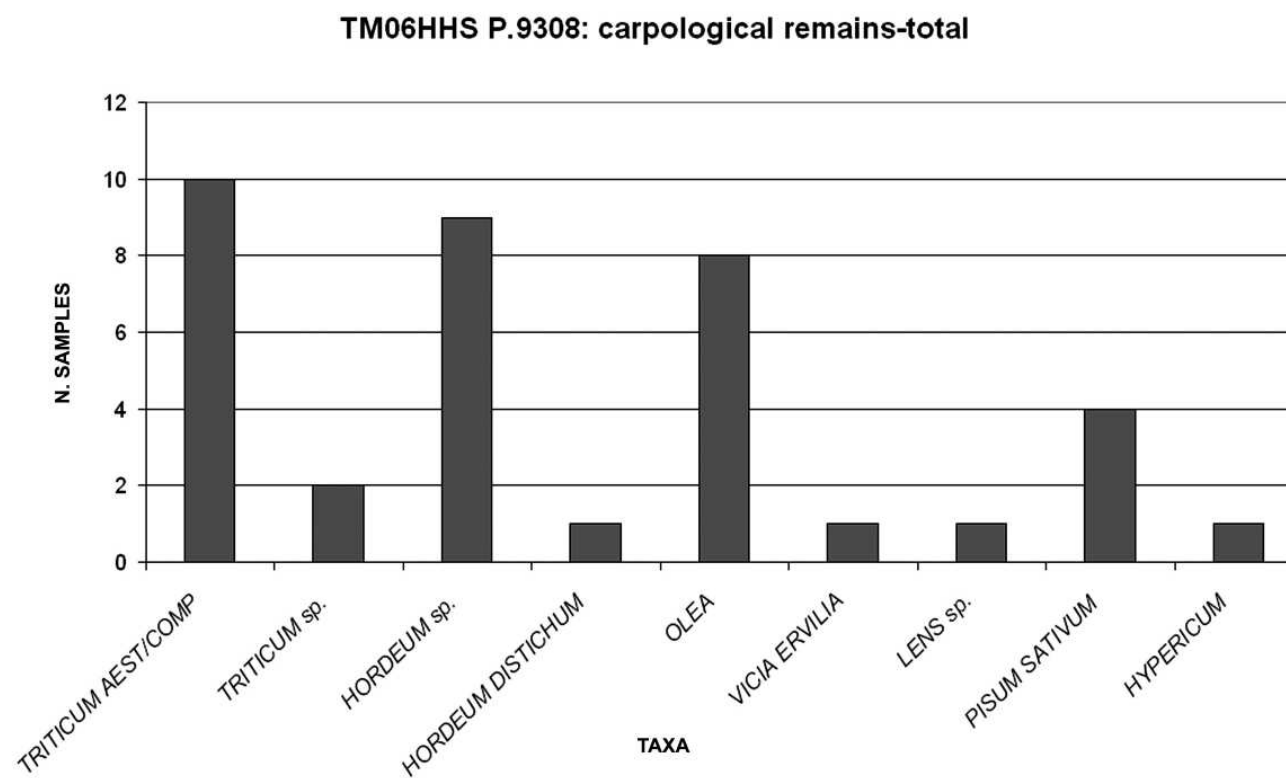


Fig. 3: The anthracological assemblage in well TM06HHS P.9308.

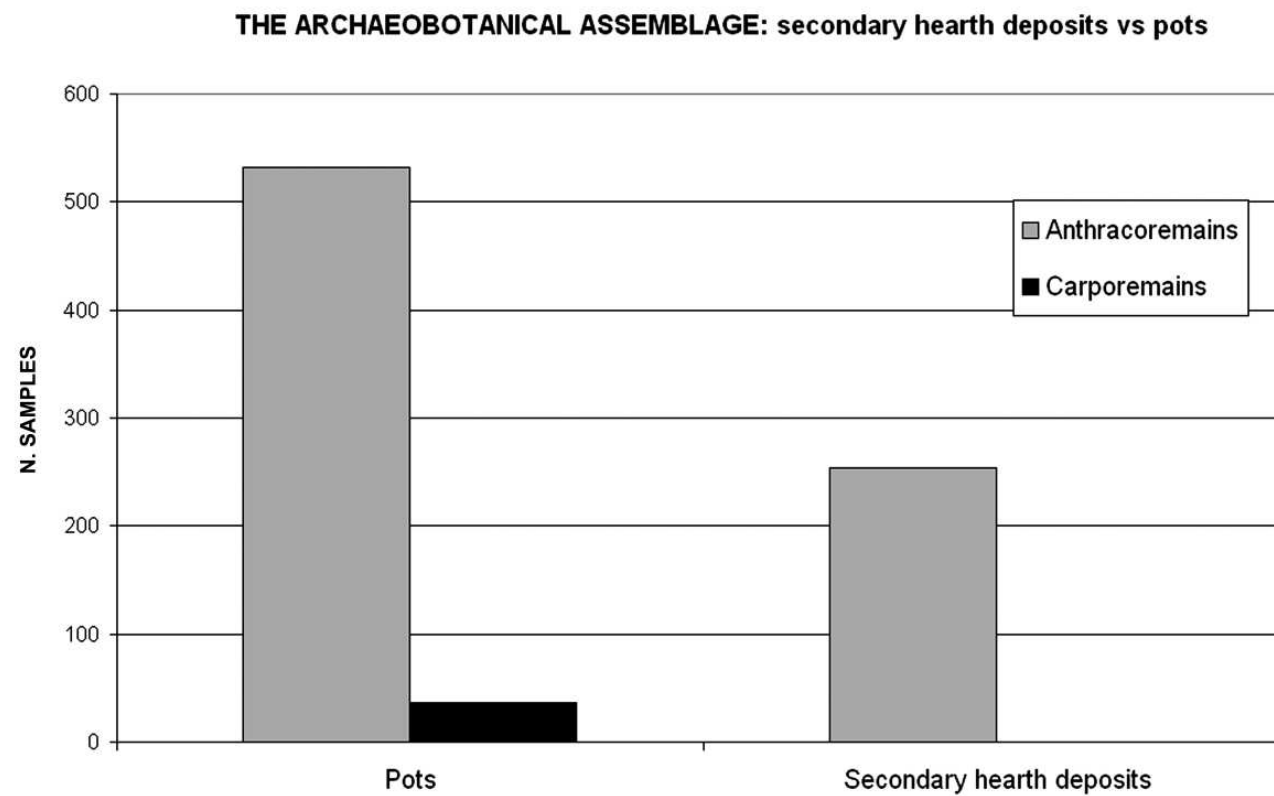


Fig. 4: The concentration of anthracoremain and carporemain coming from secondary hearth deposits and miniaturized pots.

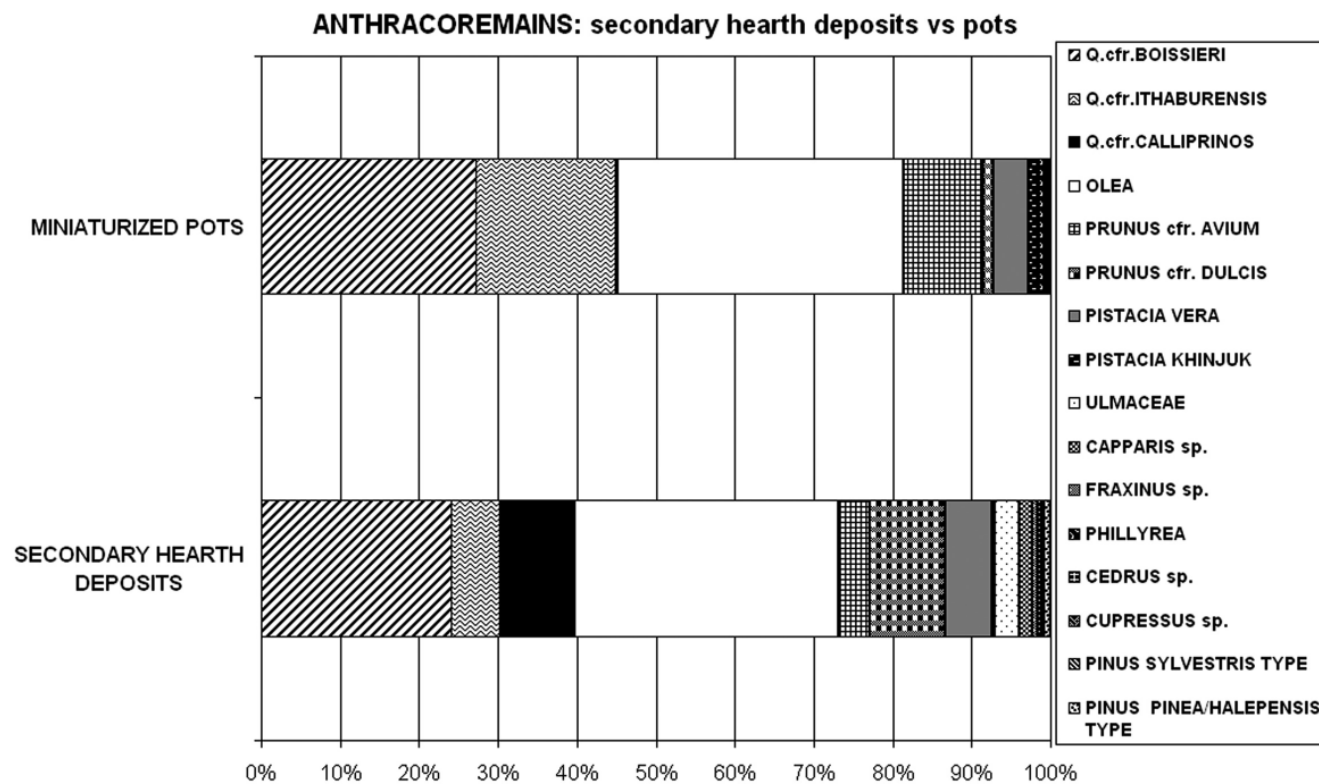


Fig. 5: Taxonomical variability in the anthracological assemblage of secondary hearth deposits and pots .

ID SAMPLES	ANTHRACOREMAINS	CARPOREMAINS
	<i>Quercus</i> cfr. <i>botissieri</i>	<i>Triticum aestivum</i> / <i>compactum</i>
*TM0606HHS 767		<i>Triticum</i> sp.
TN0606HHS 763/13		<i>Hordeum distichum</i>
TN0606HHS 763/11		<i>Hordeum</i> sp.
TN0606HHS 763/10		<i>OLEA EUROPAEA</i>
TN0606HHS 763/9		<i>Lentis</i> sp.
TN0606HHS 763/8		<i>Vicia ervilia</i>
TN0606HHS 763/7		<i>Pisum</i> sp.
TN0606HHS 763/6		<i>Hyperticum</i> sp.
TN0606HHS 763/5		
TN0606HHS 763/3		
TN0606HHS 761/18		
*TM0606HHS 761/9		
*TM0606HHS 757 P97		
*TM0606HHS 756 P95		
*TM0606HHS 732 P90		
TN0606HHS 727/19		
TN0606HHS 727/18		
TN0606HHS 727/16		
TN0606HHS 727/14		
TN0606HHS 727/7		
TN0606HHS 727/1		
TN0606HHS 720		
TN0606HHS 719/35		
TN0606HHS 719/33		
*TM0606HHS 95		
TN0606HHS 92		
TN0606HHS 60		
TN0505HHS 987/39		
TN0505HHS 987/37		
TN0505HHS 987/22		
TN0505HHS 987/20		

