

The Menial Art of Cooking: Archaeological Studies of Cooking and Food Preparation

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Ken Albala

This book is highly recommended, particularly for food historians who want to step away from their musty old texts to imagine what it would be like to work in the dirt for a while. Archaeology is a closely related sister discipline, though not well represented among the myriad fields that make up food studies today. This is a shame, as it has much to teach us, not only about the prehistoric past, but even recent civilizations. As might be expected, methodologically the two disciplines are very far apart. Archaeology is a hard science, literally and figuratively, dealing with chemical analysis of food residues, dating of pots shards and examining faunal remains under high powered microscopes. In terms of interpretation of data, however, food history and especially anthropology are very closely related. Reading the essays in this book often felt like finding a long lost sibling.

The essays collected here are drawn from a conference of the Society for American Archaeology held in 2005. The introduction acknowledges the dearth of literature specifically addressing cooking; archaeologists have moved around the hearth, looked closely at feasting rituals and social structures, and of course agricultural techniques, but they have not peered into the pot as often, nor thought carefully about the daily habits of those who butcher, cook and prepare food. I was somewhat surprised that the editors felt it necessary to defend their choice to look at cooking per se, but I will accept their testimony that the topic has been seriously neglected. The introduction very cogently summarizes the many ways the study of cooking can enlighten current archaeological debates relating to health, the influence of technological change, social relations and expressions of power. The volume largely makes good these promises and in many cases

dramatically revises the status quo in the discipline.

I am not entirely convinced that all the essays are about cooking itself: the topic might be the physical position of the cook, butchering technology, the logic of bone grease extraction, or merely what the diffusion of pots reveals about how groups expressed their identity. Or perhaps, to be more precise, the essays are not all about cuisine, what archaeological remains reveal about what people actually ate and what it might have tasted like. That veers more into what is called experimental archaeology or culinary history. Nonetheless the essays are captivating, and rarely dip into the minutiae of scientific detail to an extent that is likely to try the average reader's patience

The first essay by Sarah R. Graff is fantastic. By closely examining seal-impressed pot shards from Western Syria in the third millennium BC, she deftly overturns previous arguments about their importance. In the past they were interpreted as decorated storage vessels and used to chart the trade networks and the redistribution system of the powerful city of Ebla. Instead Graff argues that they are pieces of cooking pots. Though charred food remains would have proven this decisively, as a potter I can tell you the argument made here is proof enough. The clay body of these pots contains a high percentage of calcite, which was intentionally added to loosen the tight structure of the clay, to temper it, to prevent cracking under repeating heating and cooling. Moreover the shape of the pot, with a thin walled, rounded bottom, would never be used for storage since it makes the pots tip over or break in transport. Instead it is especially designed to sit over coals, distribute the heat evenly up the sides of the pot, and again, prevent stress cracks. Look at the base of any medieval earthenware cooking vessel or Native American pot and you will immediately notice the rounded base.

The standard argument that the impressed seals indicate prestige, expense and a desire to show off is also neatly unraveled. As any potter knows, a little decoration with a seal takes an extra minute and is definitely welcome for quotidian ware. I am not sure the corrugated surface makes much of a difference as is argued here, but otherwise the evidence is very persuasive. It is also not clear why remnants of bitter vetch found at the sites of excavation might be important. Vetches are not in fact poisonous at all unless one eats nothing else for a long period of time, leading to a motor dysfunction called lathyrism. For occasional consumption, as they still do in Italy and India, they don't need to be soaked, and certainly not ritually. Now the only remaining step would be to replicate these pots and test them over a fire. One could easily make some interesting culinary observations as well. (I hereby volunteer.)

The second essay by Gil J. Stein on 'Food preparation, social context and ethnicity in a prehistoric Mesopotamian colony' examines a trading colony in Anatolia in the fourth millennium BC. There is some interesting speculation here: since artifacts in the domestic setting are Anatolian (i.e. local) in style while those used publically for consumption are Mesopotamian (i.e. in the style of traders/settlers), this suggests intermarriage of the outsiders with local women, who used traditional wares in the kitchen. The men however wanted their serving vessels, and managed to maintain their identity as a diasporic community through their use. I kept thinking, maybe they couldn't get imported cooking pots or maybe the local wares were perfectly fine. Or maybe the Anatolians just bought these imported serving vessels and the traders never actually lived there, let alone cohabited? Moreover, the strict division by gender into private cooking versus public dining spheres, although common in many cultures, may not be the case here. The argument also hinges on the assumption that there were intercultural households. What if the pottery type is actually not a good indication of ethnicity at all?

Chapter seven, by Brad Chase, is similar in examining an outpost of the Indus River Valley civilization in Gujarat in the third millennium BC. This too was a border land, where different styles of material culture interacted. By looking at the different types of cut marks made by butchering meat with obsidian or metal the author shows how different cuts of meat were used by people within the walls compared to those without, and how this might align with ethnic identity.

Chapter three, by Christine A. Hastorf, begins with a broad introduction on the importance of food, drawing from anthropology and sociology (as do many of the chapters) and then focuses on Çatalhöyük, which

anyone who has ever taught Western Civilization I or the History of Food, knows well. Much of the picture one has gotten from the textbooks is actually mistaken. For about a thousand years from c.7400 to 6200 BC, the foodways of these people did not change that much. They did not have cooking pots until fairly late but instead used clay balls, heated and dropped in watertight baskets or wooden containers, much as Native Americans in California used volcanic rocks to cook acorn porridge. They also lived in small snug houses with living space on the roofs. Though they did eat wheat, sheep, beans and nuts, a lot of their diet was still wild. The wheat and other grains were often eaten whole as well, not always ground and baked into bread. The most fascinating part of the chapter is situating the cook right in the centre of the household, with a kind of panoptical command of the space, separate from living and storage areas but offering the ability to peer into these other places. The oven is naturally the focus of the house, but as Hastorf argues, so is the female cook. Eventually when pots are introduced, it allowed these women to multitask, decorate the space, and probably take on ritual functions as well. The analysis here could easily be applied to any kitchen space, also revealing the social importance or lack thereof in any culture.

The next chapter by Nerissa Russell and Louise Martin is also about Çatalhöyük and like the previous debunks some misconceptions. The settlement was not centrally ruled and there was no public architecture. That means production took place at the household level, mostly around clay ovens. Even more surprising is the extent to which these people depended on meat, to such an extent that they smashed up bones and boiled them to extract marrow and grease from the joints.

The eighth chapter by Tiina Manne goes further into bone boiling, though for the Upper Paleolithic in Portugal some 27,000 years ago. It appears that either environmental factors limiting the number of wild animals or population pressure led the people of Vale Boi to undergo the arduous process of grease extraction to get every last ounce of nutrition from their catches. From a purely gastronomic perspective, the idea of people using the grease to preserve and store food, similar to Native Americans and pemmican, is the most interesting part. I wonder if the discussion here could be applied to any civilization? When do cooks take extra steps to get every ounce of nutritional value from bones and why and how does this influence their cuisine? Conversely, when is food so abundant that they can afford to waste food, tossing gristly bits? This is an excellent example of the need for historians to pay closer attention to archaeology.

No chapter here does a better job of linking the past to present cultures than chapter five by Enrique Rodriguez-Alegria on grinding corn in Mexico. We are given a full explanation of the manual processing of corn, or rather nixtamal, into tortillas and tamales and why Aztec rule and the tribute system demanded portable food, hence women made these more often for men working a distance from home. Equally as fascinating is why women abandoned the difficult process of grinding at home, to buy prepared masa or tortillas, very recently. It is not simply that technology intervened, but that the socializing while grinding together in groups, still done for holidays, was enjoyable in itself. Plus, other factors, like the unreliability of electricity and long distance to the mills, slowed this shift considerably. The point is, in both contexts, the changing nature of work drove changes in the kitchen.

Chapter six by Kay Tarble de Scaramelli and Franz Scaramelli does a meticulous job in periodizing changes that took place in the Orinoco basin in manioc processing, another extraordinarily labor intensive task. Here the changes are again due to colonial rule and shifts in the economy. Ultimately large scale processing for the sake of social prestige gave way to the need to accumulate wealth under the weight of private ownership of land and capitalism. The spit-fermented manioc brew likewise gave way to purchased alcohol.

The last chapter by Guido Pezzarossi, Ryan Kennedy and Heather Law is the sole example of US archaeology and fairly recent. It analyzes the remains of a farm owned by Nipmuc in late 18th- and early 19th-century Massachusetts, arguing that the use of European wares is not evidence of acculturation. Rather it should be viewed as a unique evolution of cooking and serving practices, a tradition actively created by the cooks in the household incorporating old and new elements whose meaning should be understood via those who used them. The number and elegance of serving wares, despite the fact that the family faced economic hardship as evidenced in the historical record, also suggests that their house may have been a gathering place for the Native community. Here we also get glimpses of what the family ate and how they cooked it – hoe

cake is one example.

In all, this volume not only represents the formal self-admitted entry of archaeologists into the wider field of food studies, but it opens interesting new possibilities for further research by historians and archaeologists. Do we pay too little attention to material culture, to the alignment of cooking spaces and to the meaning of the daily act of cooking as physically experienced by the cook? Do we ignore what certain wares may say about people and the structure of households, who is included or not? Do we look close enough at the styles of pots and the cut marks or shape of broken bones to make sense of the culinary past? This book offers a welcome bridge to gather together scholars whose work is clearly closely related.

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