

THE SOCIAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF FOOD

This book offers a global perspective on the role food has played in shaping human societies, through both individual and collective identities. It integrates ethnographic and archaeological case studies from the European and Near Eastern Neolithic, Han China, ancient Cahokia, Classic Maya, the Andes, and many other periods and regions to ask how the meal in particular has acted as a social agent in the formation of society, economy, culture, and identity. Drawing on a range of social theorists, Hastorf provides a theoretical toolkit essential for any archaeologist interested in foodways. Studying the social life of food, this book engages with taste, practice, the meal, and the body to discuss power, identity, gender, and meaning that create our world as they created past societies.

Christine A. Hastorf is known for her contributions to palaeoethnobotany, agriculture, meaning in the everyday, food studies, political economy, and ritual in middle-range societies of the Andean region of South America. She has written and edited many articles and books. She has completed fieldwork in Mexico, California, New Mexico, Italy, Perú, Argentina, Bolivia, Turkey, and England. She oversees an archaeobotanical laboratory at UC Berkeley and directs an archaeological project in Bolivia. At the 2012 Society for American Archaeology meetings, she was awarded the Fryxell Award for Excellence in the Botanical Sciences in Archaeology.

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The Social Archaeology of Food

Thinking about Eating from
Prehistory to the Present

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*For my darling twins:
for life-loving Nick
and in loving memory of Kyle*

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Preface

Food creates people
The meal is a rich study
Every person's world

It is ironic that archaeologists, who spend time every day thinking about procuring their own food through breakfast, hot drinks in the morning, lunches on the run or with friends, as well as having enough food in the house for dinner, often shift away from the rhythm and meaning of these core parts of the every day to focus on distant words, concepts, and especially long-term trends and expansive forces when they turn to their material concerning the past. It is not often that we can archaeologically “see,” let alone know, the significance of chipping stone around the fire hearth before the harvest, or smoking salmon after a big catch, let alone the centrality of the endless discussions about the condition of the stored food in the corner against the wall, the mix of herbs hanging from the rafters, or that beehive over the hill toward the mountain. Yet similar daily discussions and their webs of meanings occurred in every home we uncover in our work. The satisfaction of the meal and the looming tidying afterwards are ever present in most lives. Traces of activities are what we dig up, and it is through these acts that we generate statistical data to address our social and cultural questions. Cooking, availability of plants, hunks of animal meat, amount of fuel, and the sociality of the meal would be what was on the majority of people's minds over the millennia as they kept daily hunger at bay. Sometimes this took most of the waking hours, making it even more prominent both discursively and non-discursively. Other times it was a passing event, as larders were full or trees were ripe. Perhaps focusing on those daily activities can bring the past to life and enable us to review the larger questions of cultural change, political systems, and ritual structures

with a more humane eye; it certainly will bring us closer to the people and their daily lives.

I began my archaeological career studying agriculture and human-plant interaction. I looked for evidence of production in a landscape through site excavations and agricultural field interviews. As I pursued this strategy I found I wanted to know why people changed their crop regimes when we uncovered evidence of demographic and political change. The data did not always suggest an economic answer. I was therefore led by the data from the Upper Mantaro Valley, Perú, to seek historical, cultural, and symbolic reasons for the crop changes in addition to the forceful environmental and economic data at hand. I also very much enjoyed talking with the farmers to register not only the knowledge they had of each field but also their nurturing of these fields, as they did for their animals.

As the palaeoethnobotanical methods were actively being critiqued, I also began to question the interpretations more than I had anticipated at the beginning of my entry into this craft. It was important to seek the locus of likely past activities. At first I thought I was studying the macrobotanical remains to look for evidence of consumption. With the help of Robin Dennell and Debby Pearsall, who visited UCLA in 1981 before I finished analyzing my Peruvian samples, I realized that these samples reflected production more than they did consumption. Now it is clear these data reflect processing. As I worked through that data, it began to dawn on me that each stage of the activity sequence was potentially visible in the archaeological record if we could tighten up our collection strategies, methods of inference, data recording, and data analysis. We had to try to separate, if possible, the various food activities: processing, preparation for storage or for consumption, cooking, presentation, cleanup, and so on. Both the location of the deposit and the content of the sample are important in interpretation. At the same time I began to study meal preparation and diet through stable isotope analysis, which added to my understanding of these different activity steps. I realized that we could recognize the different stages of the sequence from planting or gathering to meal creation and consumption. I had investigated the charred crust inside pots to learn about not only what was being cooked but also what was consumed over a lifetime in the human bone analysis. It was a natural step to think about consumption and food. The study of diet is important, and stable isotopes and organic compound analysis have certainly revolutionized our understanding of the past. But where were the people? That issue kept coming back to me as I thought about the people with whom I spoke in the Andes as well as about the people of the past. There was a large gap between the data and the lived

Preface

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lives of the people. At that time I was just beginning to cook real dinners for my own family, and thus I was confronted daily with issues of what to make with what I had in the house, how to plan for the week's meals, and so on. This daily preoccupation increasingly clarified the disjuncture growing in my palaeoethnobotanical thoughts. It required a change of orientation.

At about this time Sissel Johannessen started her work as a research fellow in my laboratory, and we both had this fascination with studying food via palaeoethnobotany. We organized a symposium at the Society for American Archaeology meetings in 1990 and then another at the American Anthropological Association meetings in 1991. Our hope was to get people to look at the past foodways more culturally, by thinking about eating, and so we titled the symposia that – a phrase that came from Heidi Lennstrom. The idea was to move beyond the items that were harvested and collected to cuisine, menus, recipes, ingredients, meals, the social contexts of meals, and the meanings of meals. We began writing about these topics in our research. Over the years I have thought, read, and taught about this subject; setting some of this approach down would be useful.

We were after the past, the invisible past, and that required imagination, just as the past people also used their imagination to live in their world. And so this book is a meditation on thinking about eating. Understanding is always a cultural act. This process of understanding is the cultural situation of humankind, for the struggle to understand is the work of imagination. This is what I have tried to do in this book.

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