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Foodways in Historical Archaeology

Eric Tourigny
Newcastle University
Newcastle upon Tyne
United Kingdom
eric.tourigny@ncl.ac.uk

Introduction

Foodways represents a conceptual approach adopted by researchers to study the social, cultural and ideological meanings associated with food. Adoption of this concept allows archaeologists to broaden their research questions, progressing away from simple dietary reconstructions to explore the human behaviours associated with food and the role(s) food played in shaping individual and group identities. The concept was widely adopted in historical archaeology (understood here as the archaeology of the post-CE-1500 period). Historical foodways was an especially prominent research theme in the United States from the 1970s onwards. It has since been used to address a variety of archaeological research questions in North America and beyond. The following discusses the definition and adoption of the concept in historical archaeology while summarizing key research developments.

Definition

Concepts akin to that of foodways and how it is used today were introduced in anthropology by Audrey Richards in the 1930s (Richards 1932) and further popularized through the works of Margaret Mead and the National Research Council of the United States between 1942 and 1945 (e.g., Mead 1943, NRC 1945). While addressing the challenges involved in studying food-related behaviours, these early works were influential in emphasizing the links between food habits (e.g., the procurement, preparation and consumption of food) and expressions of culture. The first archaeological publication referencing the term was James Deetz’s highly influential book *In Small Things Forgotten*, which presented research linking food habits to material culture (Deetz 1977). The book included a definition of foodways taken from folklorist Jay Anderson (1971) which now likely represents the most cited definition in American historical archaeology. It describes foodways as "the whole interrelated system of food conceptualization, procurement, distribution, preservation, preparation, and consumption shared by all members of a particular group" (Anderson 1971: 2). Later archaeologists add to this definition the behaviours relating to the disposal of food waste.
A variety of data sources are used by archaeologists to investigate past foodways. Analyses of plant and animal remains, cooking wares, food processing tools and equipment, architecture, landscapes, skeletal remains and historical documents, among other sources of evidence, can be revealing of the foods that were (and were not) eaten, the modes of production and preparation, differential consumption practices, discard habits, nutrition, divisions of labour and many other food-related habits. Each type of data also carry their own limitations and inherent biases (e.g., differential preservation or deposition patterns). Representing such a complex cultural system, no single type of data can be used to entirely reconstruct past foodways and the most comprehensive studies manage to incorporate data from diverse types of evidence.

Specific use of the term “foodways” is most often employed by historical archaeologists working in the United States, a reflection of the strong influence of Deetz’s work on subsequent research. However, the conceptual links between food and culture, whether or not the term “foodways” is used, was adopted globally by archaeologists working on historical or other time periods. Over the past two decades, the concept is increasingly being employed as a theoretical paradigm guiding archaeological research in Canada, Europe and Oceania. These studies do not always identify Deetz or Richards as etiological influences and may cite later anthropological, sociological or archaeological sources; however, all share in the idea that food and food related habits are cultural constructs imbued with meaning.

In Britain and Ireland, archaeological research making use of a foodways paradigm tended to focus on earlier periods of history (e.g., prehistoric, Roman, medieval) while later post-medieval assemblages were often deemed unimportant, uninformative, and therefore, unworthy of collection by excavators working in the commercial archaeology industry (Murphy 2007: 371). Thomas (2009) called attention to the lack of post-medieval research making use of animal bones specifically, and more archaeologists are now working to address this issue. Unfavourable views of the historical period are changing as more people are engaging with post-medieval archaeology through organisations like the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology and an increasing number of excavation reports are describing post-medieval assemblages, leading to more data available for foodways-related research.

**Key Developments**

Upon adoption of the concept, many historical archaeologists focussed on describing the foodways of early colonial groups settling in the United States and the Caribbean. Their research was highly influenced by the New Archaeology movement and its emphasis on identifying links between subsistence strategies and environmental adaptations. Reitz and Cumbaa’s (1983) study compared pre- and post-contact diets between Spanish and Native American groups in Florida. Their approach and conclusions emphasized adaptive and acculturative interpretations of early Spanish colonists’ foodways. Deetz’s (1977) study of 18th-century
Ceramics in the northeast United States led to his identification of a shift in the foodways and broader world views of Euro-Americans at the time. He noticed ceramics became more common, specialized and individualized and noted that meat was prepared for individual portions as opposed to being served as larger portions for groups of people. His structuralist interpretations of these data in combination with other observations led him to describe a change in mind set within the culture: from an earlier disorganized, organic and corporate world view towards a mechanic, ordered and individual one. Over the following decade, landmark studies concerning the foodways of earlier Americans continued to emphasize the adapted foodways of colonists to their New World setting. The influence of interactions with non-Europeans in the development of colonist foodways was rarely acknowledged and the ever-changing nature of food habits over the long-term process of colonialism was generally underexplored.

The 1980s saw historical archaeologists becoming increasingly interested in research themes exploring socio-economic relationships. Foodways archaeology was no exception and many studies were concerned with identifying socio-economic status through the analysis of differential consumption patterns of food-related material culture or plant and animal remains. Schulz and Gust (1983) represents one landmark study whereby the authors compared 19th-century cattle bone assemblages originating from deposits of contrasting socio-economic standing. The purpose was to later associate economic values to specific cuts of beef and use animal bones to identify socio-economic differences within archaeological materials. Many others followed similar approaches, often interpreting foodways through the lens of capitalism and consumer choice theory (e.g., various papers in Spencer-Wood 1987; Schmitt & Zeier 1993).

Scholars increasingly broadened the interpretive scope of foodways throughout the late 80s and early 90s. Research emphasized the flexible nature of foodways and the roles these played in the formation of individual and group identities. Similar approaches continue today, recognizing that food habits and cultural identities are inextricably linked and under constant renegotiation as a response to changing internal and external pressures (Twiss 2012). Status, gender, ethnicity, religion and other social phenomena are increasingly explored vis-à-vis their role in shaping foodways. Researchers continued to consider the effects of environment, market availability, consumer choice and socio-economic status but discussed these alongside social phenomena while considering the effects of inter-cultural interaction. Archaeologists became especially interested in studying the foodways of subaltern, silenced or disenfranchised groups (e.g., slaves, indigenous populations, ethnic minorities, women and children) and interpretations of their foodways were no longer being framed as consequential to the actions of colonists or oppressors but as active and reciprocal relationships between cultural groups. In the case of African American and indigenous populations, researchers have used foodways as evidence for the maintenance of a distinct cultural identity where groups and individuals were actively engaged in socio-political interactions while also using foodways as a form of
cultural resistance and social cohesion (e.g., Franklin 2001; Cipolla et al. 2007). Studies of gendered foodways highlight the fluid dynamics of concept by demonstrating changing meanings ascribed to material culture over time and the shifting status of women (e.g., Yentsch 1991).

As we approach the present, themes that were previously discussed on broader scales of analyses are increasingly being explored at a local or regional level, highlighting variations in the practice of foodways amongst people of similar culture/ethnicity/social status that are occupying comparable but distinct regions. While cities, surrounding regions and rural areas did not exist in isolation, their populations each experienced their own unique sets of challenges, circumstances and histories leading to different identities and ways of interacting with the world around them. Archaeological research examining the foodways of individual regions is generally focussed on exploring the local conditions that lead to unique cuisines and food habits while describing the role of food in expressing and maintaining local or regional identities. Such focus allows archaeologists to explore the subtle nuances of regional foodways and the effects of multiple social phenomena without being limited to investigating one single theme or cultural group.

**Future Directions**

Food plays such an integral role in the daily lives of all people and its centrality as a research theme is unlikely to waver as foodways research is becoming increasingly global. A rising number of archaeological excavations and improved field methods are continuously producing valuable data. Sophisticated laboratory technologies (e.g., stable isotope and residue analyses) are allowing archaeologists to extract new types of previously unimagined data and address exciting new research questions. When combined with advances in data sharing and management, researchers increasingly have access to large, complex datasets allowing them to further delve into the complexities of foodways and explore sections of society that have traditionally been more elusive in the archaeological record. As more projects are conducted at the regional/local level, the eventual combination of their data has the potential to address broader anthropological themes such as colonialism and expressions of identity (Peres 2017). The challenge will be to reconcile large and varied datasets while also better integrating and promoting our work outside of the discipline. Foodways research is a truly multidisciplinary with studies conducted in fields as diverse as English studies to public health and epidemiology. Unfortunately, archaeologists are mostly working and publishing within their own discipline while the opportunity exists to embark on truly interdisciplinary research with wide-ranging impact.

**Cross-References**

→Archaeobotany
References


