

Food and drink, and what it says about us

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What did the Vikings eat for supper? How good were the grocers in Roman Pompeii? What was it like feasting with the Greeks in the second millennium BC? How can this tell us why we like TV dinners today?

Everything you have ever wanted to know about the archaeological history of food and drink will be showcased at The University of Nottingham, UK, this month. From prehistory to the Victorian age, a postgraduate conference, the very first of its kind, aims to highlight current and on-going research into the archaeology of food and drink.

Although the eating and drinking habits of the ancient world may appear at first to have been very different to ours this conference will illustrate the many similarities — particularly in our cultural behaviour, agriculture, trade patterns, architecture and domestic contexts.

Researchers at the University say there is a lot that the study of food and drink in archaeology can tell us and it isn't just about what they ate in the ancient world. It is about how they ate, what they hunted and the production of food. It can also be used to date archaeological sites by carbon remains, pottery fragments and associated architecture. It indicates social behaviours such as feasting and religious acts such as sacrifice, and provides important evidence for how the consumption of food was an integral part of cultural and individual identity.

Sera Baker, a PhD student in Archaeology, is one of the organisers of the Food and Drink in Archaeology 2007 Conference. She says "Whilst the importance of nutrition for survival has long been recognised,

increasing emphasis is being put on the cultural significance of the production, distribution and consumption of foodstuffs throughout all archaeological periods."

The ancient Near East, the Mediterranean, Europe and the British Isles will all come under the postgraduates' microscope even the household diet of the Willoughby family, former residents of Wollaton Hall in Nottingham will be scrutinised.

More than 20 postgraduate researchers will speak on topics including hunting in Roman Britain, how food reached the Roman frontier, what was sold in the grocery shops of Roman Pompeii and Ostia, the use of stimulants in ancient societies, feasting in Mycenae and the Aegean, food storage and production in Nordic Greenland and 17th century Iceland, and what they ate in early medieval Ireland and late medieval London.

There will be a chance to dip into the remains of late Bronze Age domestic tips, learn about exotic Roman food, Dutch prehistoric agriculture and the Viking diet. Delegates will also find out what fossilised and skeletal remains in the Middle East reveal about social and cultural behaviour of the time.

The keynote speaker at the conference will be Professor Martin Jones of The Department of Archaeology at The University of Cambridge. His latest book *Feast: Why Humans Share Food* has just been published. In it he uses the latest archaeological methods to show how the human meal has developed since the earliest evidence of human consumption, around half a million years ago, to the era of the TV dinner and the drive-through diner. He says "We have now passed a watershed in analytical potential, in which we can study foods in radically transformed states, and directly connect them to the evidence of human bodies, dining spaces and artefacts. While our initial breakthroughs in this field

concerned procurement and production, attention can now move to the intriguing patterns of consumption.

The conference Food & Drink in Archaeology 2007 will be held at The Department of Archaeology on May 18–19.

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