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## Reviews

### Food

*Feast: Why Humans Share Food* by Martin Jones, 2007. Oxford: Oxford University Press; ISBN-13 978-0-1992-0901-9 hardback £20 & US\$35; 368 pp., 36 ills.

*Eating and Drinking in Roman Britain* by H.E.M. Cool, 2006. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; ISBN-13 978-0-5218-0276-5 hardback £55 & US\$105; ISBN-13 978-0-5210-0327-8 paperback £19.99 & US\$44; xvi+282 pp., 30 ills., 43 tables

*The Archaeology of Food and Identity* edited by Katheryn C. Twiss, 2007. (Center for Archaeological Investigations Occasional Paper 34.) Carbondale (IL): Southern Illinois University; ISBN-13 978-0-88104-091-3 paperback £21 & US\$42; ix+340 pp., 67 ills., 16 tables

*Chocolate in Mesoamerica: a Cultural History of Cacao*, edited by Cameron McNeil, 2007. Gainesville (FL): University Press of Florida; ISBN-13 978-0-8130-2953-5 hardback £49.95 & US\$75; 512 pp., 91 b&w photos, 97 drawings & maps, 14 tables

### Monica L. Smith

Food is a perennially popular subject with social scientists, to the extent that one might be led to wonder whether there is in fact anything new to say about eating and drinking. In many ways, scholars need food as a subject just as much as people need food as an object: it sustains us and gives us a 'fact' of human existence to think about. In an era fraught with war, social uncertainty and political contentiousness, we can still agree on one thing: people eat. And because people eat so many different things and in so many different ways, their choices about food can lead us to a rich and nuanced understanding of the environment, the economy and the social configurations of ancient times.

The subject of food has another potent benefit in the world of scholarship: it is a topic that enables researchers to connect easily with the general public.

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Most of the mundane artefacts of ancient daily life that we excavate or collect ultimately reflect the production, preparation and consumption of food: projectile points, bones, hearths, cooking pots, grinding tools, grain fragments, storage pits, serving vessels and so forth. The social elaboration of food and drink has resulted over time in an increasingly diverse and complex array of material culture. Yet its functions and uses still can be recognized. In these books, the authors all pay heed to both the scholarly and the popular touchstones of food research, with varying degrees of success.

### Foodways

Martin Jones examines the origins and component parts of the social aspects of modern human feeding behaviour such as conversation and food-sharing. Each chapter opens with a lively example drawn from archaeological or ethnographic observations, such as a chimpanzee hunting scene, the half-million-year-old site of Boxgrove, the early Levantine habitation of Jerfel-Ahmar or the scene of a contemporary Cambridge academic dinner. The book is designed mostly for an educated lay audience, and Jones works hard to intersperse light and evocative scenes in each chapter. However, the text often draws on complex chemical or geological premises without adequate explanation, and the tone of the book alternates between precise scholarly prose and melodramatic fictional recreations of ancient meal-times (like most of us, the author would have benefited greatly from the advice of an author who regularly produces trade books: being 'friendly' to the reader requires more than the occasional pop-culture reference).

Jones looks at climate fluctuation and follows Steven Mithen (1996) to suggest that the solution to the food quest was a social one marked by cooperation over meals. Leading us from the first steps of human cuisine to the present day, he suggests that the television has replaced the hearth of Neanderthal times as a focus of communal eating. In bringing us to the modern realm, however, he assumes that everyone has a nice meal whenever they want it and that the discretion of consumption is the consumer's rather than the provider's. Jones curiously avoids the

political implications of food and food production for the development of social complexity in his quest to link the ancient past with what he calls the 'nostalgia' of the 'TV dinner'.

The book has a very Old World focus. Given that it is meant to be a generalizing treatment for a global audience, it would have been useful to include some of the extensive work on New World feasting by archaeologists such as Christine Hastorf (Andes), Lisa LeCount (Maya) and Barbara Mills (North American Southwest). The best contribution of this book is Jones's assessment that, through archaeological analysis, 'the sharing of food brings people ... to the intimate interconnection between social person and biological organism' (p. 12). He also reminds us that the dichotomies and categorizations of the food quest are often overdrawn, and that we should consider the analytic implication of blurred boundaries between visitor and host, farmer and gleaner, crops and weeds.

By comparison, Cool's is an elegant, readable essay on the intricate fashioning of cuisine from political, social and economic inputs. She easily transforms the narrow subject of Romano-British foodways into a thoughtful assessment of the relationship between texts and material remains in the study of the human past. Bringing an expertise born of many years of field research and reporting, the author examines how the native and immigrant peoples of the early centuries AD modified their foodways in a dynamic process that incorporated new foods, new culinary equipment and new serving styles.

After an introductory section on archaeological and textual evidence, Cool presents short chapters on different components of the culinary process, including 'Packaging' and 'Techniques and Utensils', as well as separate chapters on particular foods including meat, drink, fish, greengrocery and game. These nicely written encapsulations weave in explanations of the archaeological process that will appeal to the uninitiated and emphasize to the professional the need for careful data recovery in the field. Cool stresses that the changes evident in the archaeological record of Roman Britain were not the result of a simple dichotomy between natives and invaders. Native traditions varied considerably in the Iron Age, and the 'Romans' themselves were as likely to be from Spain or Germany as from Italy. The process of 'Romanization' starting in the first century AD was likewise far from a programmatic and linear evolution. In the last third of the book, Cool shows how the integration of the Britons with the rest of the Roman Empire was a process that varied from north to south and between urban, rural and military sites which retained divergent economic and social trajectories.

### **Identities in consumption and production**

Katheryn Twiss presents for us a well considered collection of essays from different periods and places throughout the world. As she notes in the opening paper, a collective perspective bridges together specialist studies from sub-disciplines that are often segregated in discrete components of a site report. Rather than relegating zooarchaeologists and archaeobotanists to the preparation of discrete data sets, she advocates the development of a holistic perspective around larger questions of social dynamics (an analytic mode also advocated by Cool). Using archaeological and historical data, several of the papers that follow rely on what has become by now a tried-and-true interpretation of foodways — feasting — in the Near East (Lev-Tov and McGeough), Iron Age Britain (van der Veen), and Southern Arabia (Lewis).

More compelling in this volume is what happens when archaeologists emerge from the shadow of feasting. Identity as a matter of lived daily experience is comprehensively revealed in the consumption of ordinary meals that can sustain a great deal of variety, reflecting the creative quotidian process. One of the most innovative papers in this volume is by Nicole Boenke, whose study of Iron Age coprolites from an Alpine salt mine shows that mine workers — hardly the elite — ate a varied and robust diet; moreover, analysis of contents shows that different 'recipes' were used to produce these workers' daily meals. A focus on the individual also enables researchers to consider food as a form of everyday resistance: Amber Van Der Warker, Margaret Scarry and Jane Eastman write about the Contact period of Native North America, noting that daily choices about food items at times of social stress may deliberately have excluded non-Native foods as part of a 'revitalization' movement designed to protect against foreign influence. These papers bring to fruition the recommendations made later in the book by Christine Hastorf and Mary Weismantel, who urge us to consider the dynamic social interplay between daily meals and occasional feasts.

Many of the papers show Twiss's skill in bringing together authors whose compelling theoretical ideas are illustrated through data sets from geographic areas less well known. Richard Thomas's paper on medieval England weaves together textual and zooarchaeological data to evaluate broader economic trends resulting from political actions (sumptuary laws, royal decrees to clear forest land) and demographic shifts (massive depopulation due to the Black Death in the fourteenth century). Although meat in quantity was a marker of status in the early medieval period, it became increasingly available to households of lower status,

whereupon elites began to focus on more restricted foods, especially game birds, as status symbols. In a comprehensive and readable introduction to southern Arabia in the first millennium AD, Krista Lewis shows how different ways of taking sustenance from the landscape promote and maintain identity. In Arabia, there was a striking distinction between the agricultural modes of the highlands (terrace farming) and lowlands (dams and floodwater farming) that provided cultural unity on the quotidian scale in each zone.

The Twiss volume also includes three papers on the economic, social and political impact of colonialism on foodways. Michael Dietler summarizes the importance of looking at the colonial enterprise, which he sees as a process that can be traced back to the beginnings of states and empires. Two papers on recent historical times follow: one on French foodways in the New World (Elizabeth Scott) and one on the integration of Old World and New World culinary practices in early Spanish New Mexico (Diane Gifford-Gonzales & Kojun Ueno Sunseri). In these case studies, the authors are careful to note that, among both the colonizers and the colonized, long-standing distinctions of status, origins and language continued to influence cuisine within as well as among ethnic groups. Scott's paper is particularly striking as she shows how European prejudices were materialized in the new environment: a high proportion of game in the New World enabled poorer immigrants to indulge in the consumption of what would have been elite fare in the old country, and sumptuary laws changed to suit local conditions (for example, the Pope declared beaver to be a 'fish' because it spent most of its time in the water, so it became permissible on Catholic fast days).

Balancing the anthropological inquiry into the nature of food as a generalizing paradigm comes McNeil's *Chocolate in Mesoamerica*. In this collection of 21 papers, the authors discuss the linguistic, chemical, agricultural, medicinal, economic and social aspects of the cacao plant, often in exhaustive detail. But one wonders whether another full-length treatment of cacao is really warranted, given the appearance of so many similar books, including *The Chocolate Tree* (Young 2007 [1994]), *The True History of Chocolate* (Coe & Coe 1996) and *From Chilies to Chocolate* (Foster & Cordell 1992). The references in this volume alone (a thousand-plus) suggest that, despite many of the authors' exhortations that more research is needed, we really have achieved the last word in chocolate, that should last the remainder of our scholarly lifetimes.

While McNeil's volume has numerous points of repetition, which may be inevitable for a single-subject focus, some papers stand out for their clarity. Dorie

Reents-Budet's well-written and accessible paper serves as an excellent introduction to both the Maya and the study of cacao. Scholars of the economic consequences of Spanish occupation will also appreciate William Fowler's paper on El Salvador, which balances treatments of better known colonial effects on Mexico and the Andean region. Expanding beyond the traditional focus of cacao as the purview of elites, the more theoretical papers discuss how cacao may have been used as a 'special occasion' food by non-elites, and they highlight its role as a unifying social symbol both before and after the Spanish Conquest. Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, writing on 'The good and evil of chocolate in Colonial Mexico', provides an insightful treatment of the religious incorporation of native foods into Catholic ritual.

Food aficionados and cultural anthropologists alike will be interested in the descriptions of modern cacao use by McNeil (for Guatemala and Honduras) and Johanna Kufer & Michael Heinrich (for rain-god ceremonies among the Ch'orti' Maya). Some papers, in addition, contain a welcome progressive element in their discussion of the globalization of cacao production and its effects on small-scale modern farmers (Janine Gasco for the Soconusco region and Patricia McAnany & Satoru Murata for Belize). Archaeologists can position themselves well in current discussions of anthropogenic landscape change because we have long-term data on human adaptations; these authors show how we can move beyond passive observation to proactive advocacy as well.

### State of the art

As seen in these volumes, research on food has achieved a number of triumphs; but some caveats are in order for those working on food. Feasting is now a well-accepted and very well-theorized component of explanation for ancient political economy. Scholars have provided detailed discussions of the use, origins, domestication and impact of specific foodstuffs, particularly the carbohydrate suite of potatoes, rice, maize, and wheat. Given this solid base of work on both theoretical and practical aspects of food, new research should focus on the integrative aspects of cuisine and culture in the past.

One topic that needs more work concerns the political, culinary and social implications of famine and food stress, when choices are limited but life needs, nonetheless, to be sustained. The creativity of cooking is sometimes revealed by the diversity of foods that can be used, even if they are not the preferred, celebrated ingredients of feasts and ethno-historic documentation.

Another focus for future work is the sophisticated chemical and residue analysis to assess the choices made in cuisine when foods are mixed. This could be a way to reveal ethnic, social and economic distinctions among households whose material culture (including basic ingredients) might otherwise be very similar. Researchers should also consider how ancient 'recipes' were not utilized merely for meals, but also played a role in the development of a pharmaceutical tradition: given that so many ancient people harboured intestinal parasites, eating as a form of palliative or preventative medicine was perhaps just as important as eating for calories. Another under-studied realm is the biological relationship of food to human wellbeing in general, perhaps because there are few archaeologists who also hold advanced training in medicine and nutrition.

Archaeologists should be able to contribute to the current public health dialogue on healthy food choices by examining the factors influencing ancient consumption. For both modern and ancient people, depending on the quantity ingested, the same substance can be a food, a medicine or a poison (particularly with reference to fermented foods). Individualized consumption decisions are undertaken within broader social parameters that are, in turn, established and maintained through many thousands of everyday acts. Using these perspectives on the performative and nutritive value of food, archaeologists can capitalize on current trajectories of social theory in new ways that will continue to satisfy both the academic and popular audiences for food research.

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