

Review of: Twiss, K. C. (2019). *The Archaeology of Food: Identity, Politics, and Ideology in the Prehistoric and Historic Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Hardcover, 256 pp., 15 b/w illus. ISBN 9781108474290.

Flint Dibble

Katheryn Twiss's *The Archaeology of Food* is the tiramisu of food archaeology books. Twiss covers the full menu of methods, topics, questions, regions, and time periods that archaeologists can use to study food and its relationship with identity, politics, and ideology. While these complex ingredients would seem to make for a dense mouthful, the final concoction Twiss whips together is light and flavorful, concise and readable, leaving a reader wishing for just one more taste. The high-quality writing, low price tag (in paperback and ebook formats), and up-to-date synthesis of primary archaeological studies make this book ideal for instructors looking for an accessible textbook, experts looking for a quick refresher with extensive bibliography, and amateurs looking for a synthesis of how and why archaeologists study food.

From the outset of the book, it is clearly not a dry academic tome. Even the subheadings in the Table of Contents¹ showcase Twiss's skill in engaging the reader ("*Things to Keep in Mind When Studying Food in the Past*") and humorous approach ("*The Pimp and Nun Complication*"). Twiss seamlessly glides from standard third person description to questions addressed to the reader, thoughts in her strong first-person voice, or mixing in interesting anecdotes ("*Roughly thirty-five years ago my grandmother accidentally baked the sink drain in the Thanksgiving turkey. I will still be talking about it thirty-five years from now*" p. 4).

The first chapter sets the stage through a personal statement explaining Twiss's approach to the topic. While defining food itself can be problematic (e.g., changing attitudes towards horsemeat), "*the excitement we feel when studying ancient foodways lies in food's omnipresence, and thus its ability to testify to many different aspects of life*" (p. 2). Twiss defines the scope of the book through her own perspective. I can see some students being startled by an introductory text stating, "*I should note in the interests of full disclosure that Hayden clearly disagrees with my conception of feasting...*" (p. 7), and I can see some scholars disappointed that Twiss excises human behavioral ecology from her text. But, the straight-forward honesty of the introduction is refreshing ("*I affiliate myself with the social archaeology of food*" p. 15) and should lead to teachable moments for instructors using this text.

Chapter 2 examines how archaeologists study food, including materials and methods. "*A pile of animal bones on a table is just a pile of bones on a table... We have to consciously link such data to actual human behavior; we have to build a bridge from our tables and graphs to ancient people's habits and preferences*" (p. 18). The chapter quickly summarizes the study of plants, animals, humans, stone tools, ceramic vessels, metal objects, landscapes, trace elements, proteins, texts, art, and more used to understand the social role of food in past human societies. Given the growing importance of isotopic analyses, a large slice of the chapter reviews the evidence these methods provide.

The third chapter is similarly foundational, as the economics of food is closely integrated with identity, politics, and ideology. Twiss briefly reviews how archaeologists use food to study economic topics such as production, distribution, privatization, globalization, and labor. The chapter ends on an optimistic note: "*feasting has changed economies, across space and through time. Whereas once archaeologists discussed food and economics largely in terms of subsistence strategies, today we see research on topics from household investments to urban market systems to intercontinental trade networks*" (p. 72).

Chapter 4, on food and inequality, opens with the story of how becoming king transformed Richard III's diet. Isotopic analyses showed that, as king, he consumed an increased amount of wine, game birds, and fresh-water fish. The chapter focuses on how food can define status, from ingredients to culinary refinements. However, in typical Twiss fashion, the definition of high-status cuisine is problematized through emulation by lower-status groups, creating what Twiss labels the "*Pimp and Nun Complication*." After all, a wealthy pimp's diet emulates high status menus, despite his low prestige, and an esteemed nun's consumption mimics a low-status diet. The Arizona Garbage Project provides further complications: paradoxically, as beef prices spiked in 1973 due to a shortage, the amount of beef in household trash increased. The likely explanation – "*crisis-buying*" – is surprisingly relevant to our 2020 world.

The fifth chapter politicizes food, beginning with a meaty look at feasting and why it is so important to archaeology and politics. Moving from the relationship between feasting and power on Viking Iceland to changing feasting practices undergirding the "*Big Bang*" development in social complexity at Cahokia, Twiss reviews the range of different feasting definitions and types covered by earlier archaeologists (neatly summed in Table 5.1). Feasting is obviously important to archaeologists because of its high archaeological visibility; however, it can only be fully contextualized through comparison to more quotidian food habits. The chapter ends with brief looks at

the politics of food production, diplomacy via food, food and war, and expansionism, with a specific look at food and the Middle Kingdom Egyptian conquest of Nubia.

We have all heard the phrase, “*you are what you eat*,” and the complex relationships between food and identity are explored in Chapter 6. From archaeological examples of different ethnic cuisines across colonial America to the changing importance of pork – and pork avoidance – to shifting Philistine and Israelite identities, food is shown to be an important ingredient of ethnic identity. Twiss also delves into the ways that food distinguishes societal gender roles. Noteworthy is the laborious task of grinding grain, whose repetitive actions can be seen on the bones of ancient people, predominantly women. The gendered division of food labor not only affected past people but has impacted the topics archaeologists have prioritized for study. For too long, archaeology has downplayed certain aspects of foodways such as cooking tasks as “*routine, simple, passive, or fundamentally unproductive (in our culture’s gender paradigm, female)*” (p. 153; quoting GIFFORD-GONZALEZ, 1993, 199).

Chapter 7 divines the relationship between food, ritual, and religion. This chapter shows how the archaeology of food can reconstruct ritual practices, including Chiribaya guinea pig sacrifices in Peru (including one with coca leaves stuffed in its mouth) and elaborate feasts with the dead in Late Shang Dynasty China where bronze feasting equipment and stoves used in situ were found in the grave of Lady Hao. As with the earlier chapters, the examples Twiss weaves into the text do not just range across the globe and span the Holocene, but highlight a full suite of methods: the analysis of animals, plants, humans, pots, stone tools, isotopic signatures, and comparisons with written texts mix together to show how studying food informs our understanding of human ritual and religion.

The final chapter – titled “*Archaeology, Food, and the Future*” – highlights the relevance of the study of past food practices to our world’s problems today. The fact that “[a]rchaeology allows us to view human actions and their effects through a uniquely long-term lens” (p. 178) allows for an informed approach to sustainability, garbage, and conservation. As we struggle to find solutions to our own food and environmental crises, looking to archaeology can provide examples of collapse and potential alternative solutions (e.g., entomophagy).

The primary strength and weakness of the book is its concision. Large, complex topics are taken out of the oven after a paragraph or a page. However, in my estimation, I see only two major topics missing. The first is food in hunter-gatherer societies

of the Pleistocene and Holocene. While Twiss dismisses such research as falling under the rubric of human behavioral ecology, many studies of hunter-gatherer foodways cover social archaeology topics relevant to this text. A second topic missing is a nuanced discussion of methods used to understand food in texts. While historical examples relying on textual sources are highlighted throughout the text, little effort is made to show the methods or concerns that historians and historical archaeologists use to interpret these sources; for example, distinguishing between documentary records and literary sources and how they can reveal ancient perspectives or relate to archaeological evidence.

That said, the concision is truly the espresso shot that ties together this tasty tiramisu of a book. The text covers eight chapters in only 196 pages, with an additional 42-page bibliography listing over 630 sources. Alongside Twiss’s writing style, scholarly expertise, and exhaustive research, the concision of this book is what makes it both accessible and affordable. These qualities make it an ideal textbook for instructors, either as the core text for an archaeology of food or feasting course or a supplemental text for a wider range of Archaeology, Anthropology, Classics, Environmental Archaeology/Archaeological Science, and History courses. The short length, coupled with a bibliography stocked with fresh ingredients, provides a recipe for instructors to customize course units and doubles as an accessible synthesis of the Archaeology of Food for both specialists and the interested public. To complete the analogy, Twiss’s “*terrible jokes*” (p. xiii) are the hint of rum pleasantly aromatizing each mouthful of tiramisu.

Notes

¹ <http://services.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/archaeology/archaeology-general-interest/archaeology-food-identity-politics-and-ideology-prehistoric-and-historic-past?format=HB> [1.6.2020].

Reference

Gifford-Gonzalez, D. (1993). Gaps in zooarchaeological analysis of butchery. Is gender an issue? In J. Hudson (ed.), *Bones to Behavior: Ethnoarchaeological and Experimental Contributions to the Interpretation of Faunal Remains* (pp. 181-199). Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press.

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