How can human sensuous experiences through sight, sound, taste, smell and touch be studied in past worlds? In which ways may such a bodily perspective affect our interpretations? In this volume, the authors explore a wide range of topics, such as the materialisation and symbolism of colour, the sensuous dimensions of commensality, and cultural constructions concerning pain and odour. The articles comprise examples from various regions and time periods from Scandinavian Iron Age burial rites and classical Maya monumental art to issues of death and burial in eighteenth-century Sweden.
Making Sense of Things
Archaeologies of Sensory Perception

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The Nose, the Eye, the Mouth and the Gut: Social Dimensions of Food-Cravings and Commensality

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A few years back, Swedish newspapers somewhat reluctantly reported that “the Vikings did not eat meat, but porridge!” The vibrant image of the fearsome Vikings tearing meat off the bones and washing it down with a swig of mead was instantly transformed into a dull and gloomy one of grey peasants quietly eating simple porridge. What happened here? The article was instigated by the results of lipid analyses on food-remains from a couple of pots dated to the Viking period. Why are the rather modest, albeit interesting, results newsworthy for a wider audience? No new finds were discovered and no radical theories had emerged - just the fact that some people at this particular site at this particular point in time mainly had porridge for dinner. The article is but one example illustrating that what we eat is very much about image, cultural values and ideology. Indeed, food and ‘foodways’ are at the heart of most cultures, and in anthropology, sociology and psychology they are central issues that are considered of great social importance. As Counihan and Van Esterik (1997:1) observe: “Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is a central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships”.

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In archaeology, the discussion concerning food and ingestion has primarily focused on diet, i.e., what people have eaten (e.g. Gosden & Hather 1999). Large quantities of deposited animal bones have been analysed over the years and complex scientific analyses of human bones have been carried out in order to establish nutrition and subsistence via $^{13}$C and other isotope analyses. When you think about it, it is a little puzzling why so much effort has been invested in establishing variation in prehistoric diets, yet there has been little interest in elaborating on the social dimensions of commensality. In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the ritual use of food and especially the social dimensions of the feast, potlatch or symposia (e.g. Bray 2003, Wright 2004, Craven 2007, Twiss 2008). Still, missing from the debate are elaborated discussions about the daily gatherings around the pots and pans. The daily dinner is not just a matter of consuming nourishment; it involves planning and gathering ingredients, and thinking about ways of cooking them and how to combine them. Eating and drinking require a number of key social elements such as materiality, spatial arrangement and place, bodily experiences, mental expectations, and bonding/exclusion. There is a considerable social dimension in food that goes far beyond pure biological needs. In many ways, food culture may be a more important trait for social groups than their material culture, let alone style and design of pottery.

The material facet of eating also needs further elaboration: there is probably great potential in more detailed analyses of the various traces of food preparation, cooking and consuming, but also in investigating the idea that certain foods and beverages can work as *actants* with a potential to initiate social change. To pursue such a ‘culinary archaeology’ it is vital to recognise the multi-sensuous dimension of food. Food and foodways are very much about sensory perception, feelings and desires. The everyday meal often involves the pleasant experiences of smell, taste and colour, and feelings of comfort and satiation, as well as tension and conflict, feelings of disappointment, disgust, hunger, and even fear of poisoning. Social, material and sensuous dimensions of foodways can thus be a fruitful entrance to any social analysis of the past, whether it concerns materialities, social organisation, gender, place and space, culture-contact, change and development, settlement or ritual, etc. In this text, I wish to explore some of these issues, evaluating how a deeper understanding of commensal politics may help to elaborate upon our pre-understandings and fictions about prehistoric life in order to better make sense of the archaeological record.
The crumbs of the table: the socialness of food

How often and how much did people eat in the past? How and when did they eat? Was it mostly snacks ingested during the day rounded off with a shared supper in the evening? Although we know a lot about what people ate during different time periods and regions, we have very few clues of how, when, where, what and with whom food and drink were consumed. As foodways are in many ways culturally specific there is little point in searching for cross-cultural similarities or average numbers (Fahlander 2004). But, on the other hand, since the archaeological data is generally thin on such information it may be justified to survey how daily meals generally are arranged in small scale societies – if mainly for the purpose of broadening our horizons and to tickle our imaginations. Judging from a random pick of anthropological literature it appears that food in small scale settled societies by and large is consumed two times per day, particularly at noon and in the evening (e.g. Firth 1943, Richards 1939:72, Weissner & Schiefenhövel 1996, Weiss Adamson 2004:155, Serra & Tunberg 2009:7f). The most common dish, depending on season and biotope, is often some kind of porridge based upon the local crop (i.e. maize, jams, cassava, etc.), which is repeated on a daily basis with the occasional exception of stews made from fish or meat. A recurring theme that may strike a European as odd is that it is less common for food and beverages to be ingested simultaneously. When you eat, you eat, and you drink when you are thirsty. Another aspect that may be noteworthy is that frequently food is both cooked and consumed outdoors depending on the climate. These examples alone are important reminders that contrast with our regular hours and daily variation in the west, where we generally eat indoors with cutlery and at a table. How many would generally picture, let’s say, the average Iron Age dinner taking place outside the long house?

The many social aspects of commensality are well investigated in the social sciences. For instance, many psychosocial studies point out how sharing food brings about a semiconscious sense of intimacy (Goody 1982; Miller et al 1998:423; Smith 2002; Marte 2007). Eating together often conveys a sense of belonging and tightens the bond between members of a household. Perhaps it is the positive feelings of satiation and lack of fear of starvation that somehow percolate through and create a sense of intimacy? But, on the other hand, a food custom is also an opportunity to distance oneself by refusing to conform or eat what is offered. To share
food cooked by someone else always involves some degree of anxiety or fear of being poisoned (intentionally or unintentionally by mistake). However trivial it may seem, eating together is thus a way to build relations and express confidence (Bloch 2005:45, 56). In this sense, the common meal constitutes a social arena where hierarchies, social structure and gender relations are renegotiated and sustained (Marshall 1961; Hastorf 1991; Fiske 1993; Smith 2006:205; Jones 2009:7). Such structurated practice, or ‘gastro-politics’, Appadurai argues, can be ‘read’ as deep play, similar to Geertz’s example of the Balinesian cock-fight (cf. Appadurai 1981:509).

Concerning Indian food culture Appadurai writes:

“Food taboos and prescriptions divide men from women, gods from humans, upper from lower castes, one sect from another. Eating together, whether as a family, a caste, or a village, is a carefully conducted exercise in the reproduction of intimacy. Exclusion of persons from eating events is a symbolically intense social signal of rank, of distance, or of enmity. Food is believed to cement the relationship between men and gods, as well as between men themselves. Food is never medically or morally neutral” (Appadurai 1988:10).

However, the daily supper can also be an occasion where social distinctions are temporarily dissolved and transcended. In his book on the medieval mountain village Montaillou, Le Roy Ladurie (1990) describes the typical evening meal as an intersectional social event. Gender and social status normally determine who sits where and who eats what and the order in which it is eaten, but aside from that formal structure, the evening meal constitutes a ‘middle ground’ for all members of the household, including children and servants, where matters are discussed and gossip is debated. Information about the multi-layered village life is thus spread horizontally and vertically among the different social categories of the village. The way in which people eat can thus be important for how the society in general is structurated - especially considering its daily recurrence. This is perhaps one reason why externally forced change in subsistence can have a profound impact on societies even if sufficient alternative forms of nutrition are found in other niches.

Did the Great Auk taste like chicken? Food and the senses

How important were taste and appetising aspects of food in the past? On a basic level, there are evolutionary grounds for our most cherished tastes: sweetness, it is argued, signals the presence of energy in the form
of calories, and saltiness indicates the presence of the sodium ion (Na) necessary for the body’s fluid balance. The general dislike or aversion most have to bitterness is argued by some to be a protective mechanism against poisonous substances, etc. (Katz & Woy Weaver 2005:252). It is not surprising that we tend to crave what we need, but that still does not explain the time and effort that gets put into processing, refining and cooking raw, yet edible, foodstuffs. For example, many of our favoured tastes such as grain, nuts, beans, and meat are edible, albeit not especially appealing, in their raw, natural state, and a wild boar burned in wildfires does not smell like bacon (Anderson 2005:71). There may be several reasons for processing and heating food before eating, but without a doubt one is to release volatile oils and to change the texture in order to enhance the sensory experience. Although food in most small scale, premodern societies probably was not too extravagant, this is not to say that it was tasteless, unanticipated or unappreciated (cf. Richards 1939:72; Houston, Stuart & Taube 2006). On the contrary, processing and consuming food inspires a smorgasbord of sensory sensations and feelings.

Of the five Aristotelian senses, Taste is, perhaps a bit surprisingly, probably the least important sense involved in ingestion. Most people can tell the difference between sweet and sour, bitterness, salty, umami etc., but we experience taste and gastronomic sensations mostly through the nose (Anderson 2005:70). Smell is often enhanced by temperature to release volatile oils in otherwise essentially odourless ingredients. The smell of cooking can also bestow smellscapes around the habitation area, which like soundscapes can work to evoke a sense of hominess or, by contrast, a strange smell of the foreign ‘Other’ for outsiders (cf. Tilley 1999:180). Sight is perhaps the second most important sense when it comes to food. The appearance of the dish, such as its colour, is important for how it will taste to us. For instance, to an American the ideal colour for butter is white, whereas most Europeans would regard this as a tasteless industrial product. A warm yellow colour (even if it is artificial), on the other hand, is more appetising to Europeans. Touch, or feel, are also important parameters. For instance, the texture of the food affects the eating experience (think overcooked vegetables) and can also be an indication of freshness. Hearing is probably the least important sense involved in ingestion, but it is noteworthy nonetheless: the crunch when biting a fresh apple not only tells us that it is fresh, but also adds to the experience of its taste. These sensory aspects are not exclusively
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about gastronomy, but may have both unintentional social effects as well as being employed consciously by people to achieve certain goals and means. For instance, Appadurai (1981, 1988) has shown how the sensory nature of food, and its ability to evoke memory and create associations, is a powerful element within contemporary Hindu politics and culture (cf. Anderson 2005: 77).

The main problem in considering the sensory aspects of foodways is that the qualities are experienced quite differently not just from culture to culture, but also among individuals of the same community. Taste is generally learned by repeated exposure or cultural perception of food (Anderson 2005:73). Although most people have a natural palatability for sweetness and fatty foods for evolutionary reasons, most studies still suggest that the desire for goodies goes beyond sweet/sour, bitter or sweet (Katz & Woys Weaver 2005:3). There is thus no way for us to claim that a particular taste or food must have encapsulated the ultimate pleasure and was sought after by all. Alan Outram (2007:42) provides a telling

Figure 1: A preserved Bronze Age coprolite recently found in the Hallstatt salt mines. Here the archaeologists were not satisfied only to establish its contents, but they commissioned a student to go on a special diet and examined the faeces to confirm the precise mixture of the dish (Kern 2008:92-95). Unfortunately they did not ask the student how it tasted.
example of when he was offered a jar of fermented mare’s milk from a
Kazakhstani horse herder. He writes: “To the modern western palate it
is utterly vile. It provokes all the body’s natural reactions to rotten food.
Traditional Kazakhs love it”. We do not need to resort to exotic cases
for similar examples; most of us are disgusted by something within our
own culture’s cuisine. Food preference is surely something relational,
cultural and often something that is acquired rather than biologically
determined. Although we cannot be sure why a certain commodity was
harvested or sought after, a culinary perspective still adds a dimension
to many general archaeological questions.

You are what you eat: foodways and ethnicity

An overlooked aspect of food preferences is that in many cases they can
be more rigid than material culture (Smith 2006; Nukaga 2008). Judging
from the archaeological data, it seems quite mundane to use an axe of
‘foreign’ design, but to eat unknown and strange looking food can be
much more difficult. Food preferences are a powerful social/ethnic marker
that can reinforce group identity while at the same time distinguishing it
from that of the ‘others’ (Parker-Pearson 2003:9; Anderson 2005:124ff).
An interesting example is found in the social complexity of the south
Scandinavian Middle-Neolithic (c. 3300 – 2350 BC). The period is
traditionally perceived as a phase of cultural pluralism in which several,
more or less contemporary, material complexes have been identified. In
southern Sweden the traditions of the early Neolithic Funnel Beaker
Culture (TRB) continue into the Middle Neolithic, whereas the Pitted
Ware Culture (PWC), and the Battle-Axe Culture (BAC) emerge as
what has been considered to have been different traditions (e.g. see
Malmer 2002 for a general discussion). The appearance of what seems
to be three different sets of materialities, with different primary sub-
sistence strategies, choice of biotope, and burial practices, have fostered
an idea of the Middle Neolithic as a multicultural period. Indeed, the
stable isotopes of a few skeletons from inland BAC and TRB contexts
suggest a primary terrestrial diet while the stable isotopes from costal
PWC sites indicate a primary marine diet (Eriksson et al 2008). Recent
genetic analyses of human bones have also suggested that individuals of
the Gotlandic PWC generally seem to have been lactose intolerant in
relation to the contemporary inland farming communities (Linderholm
2008, but see also Ahlström 2009:111f). Although the distinctions
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between the different Middle–Neolithic complexes are generally based on differences in pot design, types of axes or burial customs, we might add a culinary dimension to their relations. This is an underestimated social aspect of diet that may in some cases be more important than, for instance, differences in material culture, dress and ideological beliefs. Among many societies, including western ones, there are ideas that people take on the properties of the food they eat. If you eat boar the personal character is believed to be more boar-like in relation to, for instance, individuals in a seal-eating culture (Miller et al 1998:424). Such ideas taken together with more or less arbitrary opinions of what foods may or may not be proper to ingest are likely to create and maintain ethnic distinctions. Studies of contemporary societies have shown that difficulties with ingesting dairy products are often closely related to taste. For instance, intolerance can make some people abhor milk (Outram 2007:55). Imagine the reaction of any Battle Axe group member that would visit a shore inhabited by the Pitted Ware hunter–fishers. The smell of seal ought to be quite different from that of roasted lamb and baked bread at the inland sites. On the other hand, consider a member of the Pitted Ware Culture visiting a Battle Axe group vomiting the milk that he/she had been offered to drink. Commensal politics, in the sense of what you eat and how you eat it, surely has great potential for a better understanding of the social structure within a group as well as how they relate to other groups.

A passion for taste: cravings for ingestible sensations

Although the sensory experiences of different edibles are varied and indeterminable, they still have indirect and unintentional effects in many areas of social life. Consider, for instance, the process during the early Neolithic from hunting and gathering towards settled farming and herding. This quite complex social process is often rationalised in evolutionary terms, but some scholars have also argued it to be partly because of a growing desire for alcoholic beverages (e.g. Kuijt 2009). Of course, the same arguments would also be valid for culinary aspects such as the smell and taste of freshly baked bread or a desire for certain dairy products (milk, yoghurt, cheese, sour cream, kefir, koumiss). Following such reasoning, sensory sensations of food and beverages may thus potentially work like social prime movers, or actants, to use the terminology of Bruno Latour, and if not initiating it, may at least be
a contributing factor in social change (Fahlander 2008). One modern day example of such a case is the desire for mimosa gum among certain Australian aborigines (Sahlins 1972:7). When it is mimosa season, large numbers of dispersed people, whose contact with each other is otherwise limited and sporadic, assemble at the places where it grows. The mimosa thus works as a powerful medium for drawing the groups together on a regular basis, something they normally would not have done, resulting in a whole range of important social implications.

The power of cravings for certain tastes and commodities is thus an interesting path worthy of further investigation. In humanist and social sciences the desire for power and valuables has often been taken for granted as a driving force in social change. It is not too far fetched to add food cravings to the list as one of the many potential social prime movers that may help us to better understand agency and social practice in the past. One example concerns the highly sought after cacao bean in many Mesoamerican societies (Houston, Stuart & Taube 2006:113). The evidence for the special role of the cacao bean is found in texts, iconography and inscriptions, and its social importance for the American societies can hardly be exaggerated. The cocoa bean was an important commodity highly appreciated mainly for its sensory aspects rather than any nutritional value. It was traded extensively, not unlike the Greek and Roman wine trade. One example is the recently discovered village in the lower Ulúa river valley of north-western Honduras (c. 1100-900 BC). The excavators argue that its particular location is explained by its suitability for growing cocoa-beans destined for the Olmec cultures in present-day Mexico (Henderson & Joyce 2007). It is quite clear that the craving for cacao on the part of the Maya kings is an important factor with a great range of implications for the Maya society.

In societies such as the Roman Empire or the Maya civilization, exclusive tastes are often hierarchical and status ridden, and generally only a matter for the elite (Appadurai 1988:10). It is also mainly in such contexts that we find the explicit fascination with exotic edibles that did not necessarily have to taste good. In the everyday life of small-scale societies, however, taste probably goes before exclusiveness. A special category of edibles that seems to have been appreciated from early on includes products that are not eaten alone, but which can be added to enhance the flavour of certain foods, such as honey, salt and peppers. In the Andes there are indications of early domestication of the chilli that point to deliberate production of products with special tastes (Outram
Salt in various forms has been explored at least since the Mesolithic. At Muntanya de Sal on the hills of Catalonia, to the northwest of Barcelona in Spain, salt has been mined from c. 4000 BC. In America special clay trays have been found which seem to have been manufactured specifically to extract salt via evaporation of salt water (Outram 2007: 57). Honey is another sought after taste that involves rather painful measures in order to obtain. In Cueva de la Arana (the cave of the spider) in Spain there is a painting dated to c. 5000 BC. that some argue depicts an act of honey-collecting (Toussaint-Samat 2009: 15). Traces of honey have also been found in pots, like in the case of the Bronze Age Egtved burial in Denmark (Outram 2007: 56; Ikram 1995: 170).

It is, of course, difficult to argue that it was primarily the sensory experience of these commodities that was sought after and not the preserving effect they all have on food. But we should not exaggerate the need for preservatives in prehistoric societies; there are easier ways to obtain that result (smoking, drying, graving etc.). Considering the time and effort that was invested in extracting or finding these edibles it does seem that most were first and foremost collected for their sensory value. For instance, Richards (1939: 55) describes the great appreciation of salt among some peoples in present day Congo. Here, salt is extracted in small amounts from a special kind of river-grass, a very tedious and painstaking process.

Although, the objects for sensory desires may change according to time and place, the possible importance of cravings should not be underestimated. On the contrary, a culinary perspective can provide new ideas and interpretations for familiar data. Consider, for instance, the massive layer of snail shells in the Frankthi Cave, dating from c. 10,700 B.C., which is overlaid by with bones of red deer and, then, nearly four thousand years later, tuna bones (Fernandez-Armesto 2002: 57). Is this a case of prehistoric gluttony or simply a resort to different nourishments when others were scarce? The same reasoning can be applied to the shell-middens of the European Stone Age. This is not necessarily the remains of a widening of subsistence base caused by a dearth of wild game, but may also be the result of a desire for a special tasty (and salty) commodity. We can add a wide range of other possible commodities, such as hazelnuts, seal, pigs, birds and other small game etc. that might have been collected and/or domesticated mainly for sensory pleasures or ethnic food preferences. We will probably never know if the extinc-
tion of the great auk is a result of it being easy to catch or if it actually tasted especially good and was therefore in high demand. It cannot be doubted, however, that the sensory aspects of food are rewarding to consider when discussing traditional archaeological questions such as the distribution of temporary camp sites, long distance travelling and cultural encounters, and so forth (Fahlander 2007).

With an appetite for change: expanding our fictions of the past

In their influential book on the sensory worlds of the Maya, Houston, Stuart and Taube confess that: “The senses of taste and touch are left for last because the evidence for them is relatively weak” (2006:175). Indeed, it is difficult to prove beyond all doubt the importance of certain tastes and preferences in prehistoric contexts. Although many aspects
of particular foodways are immaterial and thus seem difficult to grasp, there are nonetheless indirect traces and ways to explore and pursue the subject. For instance, we may benefit from discussions on the materialities being used in terms of sets of plates and pots, which may give us clues as to how food was consumed (e.g. Parker Pearson 2003; Eriksson 2008). Also, extraordinary sites such as the ‘Bronze Age Pompeii’ at San Paolo Bel Sito in Italy can provide valuable insights into everyday consumption of food. San Paolo Bel Sito comprises three well-preserved Bronze Age houses (c. 1800-1600 BC) with their furnaces, pots and pans left in situ after the inhabitants fled from the erupting volcano (Livadie 2002). More ‘ordinary’ sites also generally contain remains of food processing such as facilities for storage, distribution, fermentation, evaporation smoking, etc. in addition to the obvious traces from cooking (e.g. hearths, cooking and storage pits). Such features are, however, rarely elaborated upon in archaeological analyses (if there is no ritual aspect that can be tied to them). There certainly is a hidden potential in this category of features, ready to be explored in conjunction with expanded discussions of a wider range of cooking techniques and associated practices (see fig 1). The different ways in which we prepare and consume food affect what constitutes the archaeological record and with greater concern

Figure 3: One traditional way of cooking food by putting heated stones into an animal-stomach container. Cooking in skin is a method that has been used by Mongols, American Indians and even Scottish soldiers in the Middle Ages (modified from Toussaint-Samat 2009:9f). How did the heated stones affect the taste of the food prepared?
for formation processes, for example, it might be possible to say more about such specific practices (cf. Isaksson 2010).

In this text I have emphasized a number of themes related to the sensory dimension of foodways that have to date seldom been elaborated upon in archaeology. In a general sense I have sought to stress the multi-sensuous dimensions of consuming food and its social consequences for the structuration of a social group. Food is about image. There is a considerable social dimension in food that goes far beyond biological needs. The way in which people eat, with what, and where and how is equally important to understanding both change and tradition in a particular society. Sharing food is repeated daily and is a practice in which hierarchies and social distinctions are maintained in intricate ways. Food-culture is also an ethnic trait, separating people with different traditions from each other by differences in smells, tastes or ideas of what is edible. In many ways it can be argued to be an important ethnic marker (barrier) surpassing corporeal traits, style and form of material culture. The materiality of foodways is thus a neglected part of material culture studies. One interesting aspect lies in its potential to evoke and initiate agency. For instance, certain valued commodities such as alcohol, fresh baked bread or dairy products may very well have been stimuli for a change to settled farming during the Neolithic. Also the limited distribution of certain sought after commodities with a high degree of tastiness such as salt, cacao, honey, hazelnuts and chillies may under some circumstances be important social factors behind the spatial distribution of both temporary and permanent sites. Certain commodities can have interesting social side effects, such as in the case of the mimosa-gum, which initiated annual gatherings of otherwise dispersed hunter-gatherers who would not have met in a similarly positive context without the mimosa as a catalyst. Certain tasty commodities may also evoke trade and long distance relations with other groups and thus constitute a link between the local sphere and the world outside. However, although the smell of bread may be pleasant, it alone is not reason enough to explain the extraordinary change in lifestyle represented by settled farming. Nor is it plausible, for example, that the Pitted Ware Culture emerged as a different tradition due to cravings for seal. But by including a ‘culinary’ perspective we might be able to develop more complex fictions about everyday life and may be able to deliver new answers to old questions. Although food preference may be a matter of taste, it is a matter that matters.
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