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Frontispiece 1. Organic food. Ancient Egyptian foodstuffs from the tomb of the architect Kha and his wife Merit near Deir el-Medina, c. *1425–1353 BCE. When Ernesto Schiaparelli discovered this intact tomb in 1906, he found an abundance of well-preserved food carefully arranged on wooden and reed tables, immediately in front of the coffins. Among the funerary offerings were: loaves of bread; amphoras of grain, wine and preserved meats; bowls of vegetable paste; seasoned vegetables; grapes, dates and other fruit; sacks of doum nuts; bunches of garlic; baskets of juniper and cumin; and a box of salt. These foods reflected daily life but also ensured the couple's sustenance in the next life. Although they are now a feast for the eyes in the Museo Egizio Torino, Italy, recent analysis of vessels from the tomb using mass spectrometry has captured volatile compounds that are still being emitted by their organic contents, indicative of the odours of dried fish, beeswax and fruits. Photograph: public domain.*



Frontispiece 2. Sweet treats. Ancient Chinese pastries from a Tang dynasty (mid-eighth century CE) tomb group at Astana, Xinjiang, excavated by Sir Marc Aurel Stein during the early twentieth century. From top-left to bottom-right: wafer fragment (70mm long) made by joining different layers of dough; knotted pastry made of rolled dough; triangular wafer; flower-shaped tartlet with remains of fruit or jam in the middle; leaf-shaped open-work pastry; circular pastry with sides moulded into the shape of downward-hanging petals and the remains of a fruit or jam filling. The pieces are now housed in the British Museum. Conservation treatment has involved vacuum cleaning, brushing, chemical consolidation and the addition of strengthening material. On display, these baked goods, probably made of wheat flour and originally part of non-Chinese cuisine imported from the west and embraced in Tang China, have helped tell the story of interconnections along the Silk Roads. Photograph: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

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Editorial: Food matters

Food for thought

Food matters to all of us. We must eat to survive, but doing so is complex. Financial, cultural, health and ethical concerns affect the way we think about and consume food. Global issues also impact the food policies and legislation our politicians create to regulate farming practices and food markets, security and sustainability, food sovereignty and aid, and to assert national heritage cuisines and decolonise diets. Contradictions abound, including between the capacity of the food industry to feed everyone and the failure of leaders to overcome global hunger, and between an epidemic of dietary diseases rooted in over-consumption and the increasing need for food banks in many wealthy nations. It is pertinent, then, that in this August issue of *Antiquity*, John Schofield uses the example of food security to insist that archaeologists focus far greater attention on the existential 'polycrisis' facing humanity today, arguing that we can influence better food futures through sharing lessons from the past.[1] Whatever your position on this debate, it is undeniable that food remains are a fundamental source of archaeological data and that studies of food practices stand high on the archaeological agenda. This was particularly evident at the latest annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) held this spring in San Francisco (a renowned food destination) and is also reflected in some of the other articles published in the current issue of *Antiquity*. Here, I draw on both these sources and on the wider published literature to reflect on the current scope, strengths and limitations of food studies in archaeology and some future directions. I am extremely grateful to Katheryn Twiss and to Valentina Vulpi for their incisive comments on a first draft.

An essential and popular ingredient?

Food systems continue to feature as a key component in interpretive models of diverse past societies.[2] This was particularly evident in papers and posters presented at the SAA meeting, where food resources and practices were frequently conceived as embedded among a range of dynamic factors tied to the strategic behaviours of human

[1] Schofield, J. 2026. Archaeology and the polycrisis: priorities for future-oriented practice. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10332

[2] E.g. Crabtree, P.J. 1990. Zooarchaeology and complex societies: some uses of faunal analysis for the study of trade, social status and ethnicity. *Archaeological Method and Theory* 2: 155–205. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20170207; Reed, K. 2021. Food systems in archaeology: examining production and consumption in the past. *Archaeological Dialogues* 28: 51–75. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203821000088

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groups.[3] Multiple food resources (plant and animal, wild and domesticated, staple and secondary) were documented, along with changes over space and time in their various procurement strategies (from hunting and gathering to agricultural production) and nutritional contributions (including dietary shortages and stress). These were connected to climatic shifts, environmental affordances, human impacts on land and sea, human mobility and population dynamics, and labour organisation. Likewise, diverse practices of food processing, storage, supply, consumption and disposal were attested, along with related artefacts ranging from pottery vessels to tin cans. They were related to the changing contexts of sites, economies and wider material cultures. The social dimensions of food and food practices, including their visual representation and ritualised consumption, were also considered. These were situated alongside the health of diverse members of society, ritual economies and religious beliefs, networks of interaction, exchange and trade, conflict, politics, ethnicity, value systems and heritage. On the latter, for example, Amanda Logan pointed out that archaeologists must sometimes deal with exaggerated narratives, such as in Central Asia where food heritage can represent past steppe people as consuming significant quantities of meat and dairy products, contrary to the more nuanced archaeological picture of them also eating plant foods.[4] Evidently, archaeologists are not overlooking the vital and embedded significance of food in both past and present societies.[5]

When disseminated beyond scientific communities, including via blogs such as Rachel Egan's FoodAndArchaeology.com[6], archaeological knowledge is also contributing to growing public interest in learning about and re-creating traditional dishes. Aspirations to achieve greater historical accuracy in reconstructions are, in turn, stimulating more detailed archaeological and historical research into ancient ingredients, recipes and tastes.

Archaeologists do, however, acknowledge that there was more to life in the past than the quest for food. We are reminded, particularly by members of Indigenous communities, that plants are not simply good to eat. They also provide human groups with valued materials for a vast range of cultural expressions, from fuel to crafts, medicines, symbols and stories.[7] Similarly, the significance of large 'game' animals (such as deer and bison) to human societies is recognised as extending well beyond food, from providing raw materials for artefacts, to helping sustain the health of grasslands, to informing the

[3] Society for American Archaeology. 2026. Session abstracts of the 2026 SAA 91st Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California. Available at: https://saa.org/common/Uploaded%20files/saadocs/AnnualMeeting/Abstract/91st-annual-meeting-abstracts-(San%20Francisco_CA_2026).pdf (accessed 15 May 2026).

[4] Zanina, O.G. *et al.* 2021. Plant food in the diet of the Early Iron Age pastoralists of Altai: evidence from dental calculus and a grinding stone. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 35. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2020.102740

[5] For introductions to this field, see: Hastorf, C.A. 2016. *The social archaeology of food: thinking about eating from prehistory to the present*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Twiss, K.C. 2019. *The archaeology of food: identity, politics and ideology in the prehistoric and historic past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Bescherer Metheny, K. & M.C. Beaudry (ed.). 2015. *Archaeology of food: an encyclopedia*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

[6] Global adventures in food and archaeology. https://foodandarchaeology.com (accessed 15 May 2026).

[7] E.g. Atalay, S. 2020. An archaeology led by strawberries, in K. Supernant *et al.* (ed.) *Archaeologies of the heart*: 253–69. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36350-5_16

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Figure 1. Holocene shell midden during excavation on the Patagonian Atlantic coast at Punta Medanosa, Santa Cruz province, Argentina. Photograph: Mikelzubi. CC BY-SA 4.0.

symbolism of more-than-human beings.[8] Shell middens and bone mounds have also served as community landmarks and burial places, and Ancestral sea gardens continue to play important roles in many Indigenous groups' politics, social lives and heritage revitalisation efforts (Figure 1).[9] These broader perspectives valuably enhance contextualised and modelled understandings of food systems.

Food science

Overall, then, scientific studies of the archaeology of food continue to thrive and be of significant benefit to the discipline. Old and new datasets and approaches are helping enhance knowledge on multiple scales and themes. For instance, they are adding nuance to understandings of weaning practices, changing human diets, food resource

[8] E.g. Russell, N. 2026. *Hunting and eating symbols*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009321563

[9] E.g. McNiven, I.J. & R. Feldman. 2003. Ritually orchestrated seascapes: hunting magic and dugong bone mounds in Torres Strait, NE Australia. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 13: 169–94. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774303000118; Pacific Sea Garden Collective. 2022. Sea gardens across the Pacific: reawakening ancestral mariculture innovations. https://doi.org/10.6069/ZJB9-CG30

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procurement and consumption strategies, related artefacts, and the human impact on populations of exploited species and their ecosystems. They are also providing historical baselines that have the potential to inform modern food security and agrobiodiversity policies and practice—in fisheries, for example.[10]

Scientific techniques now enable the reconstruction of ancient diets with unprecedented amounts of detail.[11] Archaeobotanists, zooarchaeologists and other archaeological scientists successfully and systematically recover a wide array of dietary evidence: not only charred seeds, animal bones, coprolites and other remains visible to the naked eye, but also pollen grains, phytoliths, starch grains, lipids, proteins and smaller molecules from sediments, artefacts and human and animal bones (Frontispieces 1 & 2). They analyse these remains using an equally diverse range of techniques. Macromorphological analyses are complemented by microscopic approaches (including scanning electron microscopy), biogeochemical methods (notably stable isotope analysis) and biomolecular approaches (such as proteomics and ancient DNA analysis). Accompanied by novel statistical approaches and enhanced analogy-building through experimental work and ethnographic studies, the array of analytical methods now available permits archaeologists to construct better-substantiated and more detailed understandings of plant and animal communities and food resources over space and time. As a result, new light is being shed, for example, on various Chenopodium species, including the global 'superfood' quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa*) originating in the Andean highlands, which archaeologists have sometimes marginalised through categorisation as 'weeds' or 'intermediates' between wild and domesticated forms, but which are now being reconsidered as fodder, famine foods and early seed crops[12] (Figure 2).

Food critics

☙ It is a sign of strength, not weakness, that archaeological scientists are increasingly acknowledging and debating the limitations of the research questions, materials, methods, assumptions and inferences they use in food studies. Concerns regarding distinguishing and quantifying multiple mixed ingredients, pre- and post-deposition taphonomic processes, preservation biases, modern contamination, sampling strategies, inter-laboratory replicability, analytical methods with different parameters, incomplete reference collections, 'shifty' baselines and data integration are applicable to all datasets. For example, Terry Powls' comment at an SAA forum on organic residue analysis that, to avoid airborne contamination, we should avoid breathing coffee and chocolate

[10] E.g. Barrett, J.H. 2019. An environmental (pre)history of European fishing: past and future archaeological contributions to sustainable fisheries. *Journal of Fish Biology* 94: 1033–44. https://doi.org/10.1111/jfb.13929; Rogers, A.J. 2024. Aquaculture in the ancient world: ecosystem engineering, domesticated landscapes and the first blue revolution. *Journal of Archaeological Research* 32: 427–91. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-023-09191-1

[11] Peres, T.M. 2023. *Foodways and archaeology: methods and cases*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41017-8

[12] Belcher, M.E. *et al.* 2023. Turning over a new leaf: experimental investigations into the role of developmental plasticity in the domestication of Goosefoot (*Chenopodium berlandieri*) in Eastern North America. *American Antiquity* 88: 554–69. https://doi.org/10.1017/aaq.2023.54

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Figure 2. Field school for farmers on crop husbandry and quality production of quinoa (pictured in the foreground) near Puno, Peru. Photograph: Crops for the Future. CC BY-SA 3.0.

molecules onto museum samples was no joke. Different analytical approaches also present specific issues. For example, the stable isotopes of carbon ($\delta^{13}C$) and nitrogen ($\delta^{15}N$) are often characterised as 'dietary isotopes', capable of distinguishing consumption patterns within a food system. However, local environmental conditions of food production (including elevation, aridity, livestock grazing, the use of manure and fertiliser) can impact isotope values, as much as or more than the type of food consumed, leading to substantial variation in the data.[13] Care needs to be taken, then, not to exaggerate expectations that residues can always take us closer to understanding complex foodways, from recipes to rituals. Similarly, key words and concepts should not be imposed uncritically onto diverse archaeological contexts. For example, frequent unequivocal claims that large archaeological deposits of cooking and serving utensils, hearths, ovens and food remains (sometimes including traces of fermented alcoholic beverages) represent 'feasts'—intended to mark socially, politically and religiously significant events—need to be taken with a pinch of salt, given how similar some such deposits can

[13] E.g. Styring, A.K. *et al.* 2016. Disentangling the effect of farming practice from aridity on crop stable isotope values: a present-day model from Morocco and its application to early farming sites in the eastern Mediterranean. *The Anthropocene Review* 3(1): 2–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019616630762

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be to those formed by everyday commensality in communities.[14] The argument presented by Anderson Carter and colleagues, in their article published in the current issue of *Antiquity*,[15] that rock doves or common pigeons (*Columba livia*) were managed at the city site of Hala Sultan Tekke on Cyprus, *c*. 1650–1150 BCE, to be consumed during ritual feasting needs, then, to be read in this light. So too does the claim made by Thiago Kater and colleagues that the widespread adoption of Pocó-Saladoid style decorated ceramics in the Amazon and Orinoco basins of South America around 1550 BCE may have been associated with competitive feasting practiced by more sedentary communities connected by long-distance trade.[16]

Foodways

☙ Notwithstanding the necessity of interpretative caution, if archaeological food studies are to speak to non-specialists within and beyond the discipline, we do need to say something about 'foodways'. Social scientists use this term with reference to the whole system of beliefs and practices relating to the production, distribution and consumption of food shared—and challenged—by members of a particular culture or social group.[17] Consumption extends to the politics of food demand, labour, access and exclusion.[18] Although some archaeological scientists can use the term 'foodways' in rather loose and generic ways to refer to both what people eat and how people eat, other archaeologists are mobilising it more thoughtfully across a range of studies. Most draw primarily on patterns in archaeological datasets, others also incorporate ethnohistorical and documentary sources (including traditional cookbooks), while many increasingly offer interpretations with a sociopolitical emphasis.[19]

For archaeologists, consideration of foodways helps bring out the dynamic, flexible, strategic, contextually diverse and complex nature of human food practices and their material remains in past societies. As outlined above with reference to food systems and their place in broader archaeological models, the specifics of food procurement, production, storage of surpluses, provisioning, processing and consumption are all in scope,

[14] c.f. Rowley-Conwy, P. 2018. Zooarchaeology and the elusive feast: from performance to aftermath. *World Archaeology* 50: 221–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2018.1445024; Dietler, M. & B. Hayden (ed.). 2001. *Feasts: archaeological and ethnographic perspectives on food, politics and power*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.30347352

[15] Carter, A.L. *et al.* 2026. Birds of prayer: uncovering the lives of rock doves (*Columba livia*) in Late Bronze Age Hala Sultan Tekke, Cyprus. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10351

[16] Kater, T. *et al.* 2026. The Pocó-Saladoid connection and the first widespread technological ceramic tradition in Tropical Lowland South America. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10354

[17] E.g. Lévi-Strauss, C. 1964. *Le cru et le cuit.* Paris: Plon; Counihan, C. *et al.* (ed.) 2019. *Food and culture: a reader.* New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315680347

[18] E.g. Mintz, S.W. 1985. *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history*. New York: Viking Penguin.

[19] E.g. Graff, S.R. 2018. Archaeological studies of cooking and food preparation. *Journal of Archaeological Research* 26: 305–51. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-017-9111-5; Logan, A.L. *et al.* 2019. Usable pasts forum: critically engaging food security. *African Archaeological Review* 36: 419–38. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-019-09347-9; Pérez Rodríguez, V. *et al.* (ed.) 2024. *Mesquite pods to mezcal: 10,000 years of Oaxacan cuisines*. Austin: University of Texas Press; Price, M. 2026. *Food taboos in archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009663595

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including their ecological, economic, sociopolitical and symbolic dimensions. Variability in foodways is highlighted.

Foodways change over time, in response to environmental and cultural shifts, and they vary over space. This is illustrated by two articles on Chinese archaeology published in the current issue of *Antiquity*. In their research article, Bing Yi and colleagues argue from isotopic evidence that Neolithic settlers adapted to the environment of Haitan Island in South China from around 5550 BCE by choosing a lifelong dietary reliance on marine foods, including 'high-protein, high-return' dolphins, supplemented by a much smaller proportion of terrestrial animal and plant foods.[20] In their Project Gallery article, Xingyi Wang and colleagues also document through archaeobotanical remains the increasing dietary complexity and urban-rural integration seen at Jizhong in eastern China during the sixth–fourth centuries BCE, when the site developed as a political centre of the Yue State.[21]

Foodways are also bound to social categories and distinctions, including social inequalities between females and males, commoners and elites, Indigenous people and colonists, enslaved people and enslavers. For example, ongoing doctoral research by Allyson Shenkman is exploring the significance of tortillas in ancient Mesoamerica, as a portable and durable food cooked quickly on ceramic *comales* (comparable to Western griddle pans), arguably by construction workers around the Avenue of the Dead at Teotihuacan, Mexico.[22] In contrast, in the Plaza of the Columns complex at the same site, archaeobotanical analysis of a claimed feasting deposit indicates the consumption of both local and foreign plant foods, such as cacao (*Theobroma cacao*) and manioc (*Manihot esculenta*), of which the latter are thought to have been used by Maya dignitaries to help establish their social identity and position[23] (Figure 3). Recent research at the nineteenth-century Russell Kitchen House in Charleston, South Carolina, is also revealing not only the food cooked by enslaved people for resident white families but also the food they chose to cook for themselves in a second-floor bedroom—West African-influenced meals of cowpeas (*Vigna unguiculata*), sesame (*Sesamum indicum*) and okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*).[24]

Foodways can also be upended in certain circumstances. Daniel Pilař and colleagues' archaeological excavation of a 1950s labour camp linked to Prague's Stalin Monument, presented in another *Antiquity* Project Gallery article, highlights the ideological pressure and social consequences on members of the intelligentsia in communist Czechoslovakia who were forced to labour there. This helps to explain how the norms of food waste

[20] Yi, B. *et al.* 2026. Human maritime adaptation on Haitan Island, China, *c.* 7500 cal BP: new isotopic and dating evidence. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10335

[21] Wang, X. *et al.* 2026. The Yue site at Jizhong: Warring States and early Imperial agriculture and diet in the Lower Yangtze. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10346

[22] Shenkman, A. & L. Carpenter. 2026. The early comal in Oaxaca: exploring specialized usage, in *Society for American Archaeology 2026*: 628–29.

[23] Cagnato, C. *et al.* 2025. Amorphous carbonized objects and their contribution to reconstructing ancient Mesoamerican cuisine: an innovative non-destructive methodological approach. *PLoS One* 20. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0334457

[24] White, C.E. *et al.* 2025. Food evidence from a nineteenth-century kitchen house in Charleston, South Carolina. *Historical Archaeology* 59: 597–633. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41636-025-00580-5

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Figure 3. A depiction of a Maya lord being presented with a bowl of frothing chocolate, painted on a cylindrical drinking cup from the Petén region, Guatemala, c. 700–850 CE. The glyph painted second from the bottom in the far-right column is the sign for cacao. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photograph: public domain.

behaviour were literally and metaphorically thrown out of the window of a kitchen building, below which a curious assemblage of porcelain plates, beer glasses and the remains of at least 87 ducks were found concealed under a layer of tar paper.[25]

Integrative approaches to food and foodways

Some of the most vivid and convincing archaeological insights into food and foodways are those based on combinations of diverse datasets, methods, results and interpretations.[26] This certainly appears to be the emerging direction of travel, to which many specialist areas of archaeology and other disciplines can contribute. For example, organic residue analysis of ceramics depends not only on producing chemical data but also on bringing these together, in an accessible manner, with culturally specific typological and contextual archaeological data, particularly relating to the uses of pottery vessels,

[25] Pilař, D. *et al.* 2026. Archaeology of forced labour in 1950s Prague: the case of Stalin's monument. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10345

[26] E.g. Scarry, C.M. *et al.* (ed.) 2023. *Ancient foodways: integrative approaches to understanding subsistence and society*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813069494.001.0001

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to be able to contribute to understandings of complex dishes and foodways.[27] Studies of dental calculus are also revealing an impressive array of materials that ended up in peoples' mouths, helping us understand what they did and did not intend to eat.[28] And, of course, this requires specialist knowledge of both plants and animals, whose very different datasets are still insufficiently integrated by archaeobotanists and zooarchaeologists, albeit not for the lack of trying.[29]

Concluding thoughts

☙ Food can get almost everywhere in archaeology, from molecular residues to interpretive models to blogs. The archaeological study of the science and culture of food is now becoming recognised as much more complex than previously conceived. Simple, unequivocal interpretations of food-related residues and artefacts are now rarely appropriate. Instead, archaeological scientists are calling for even more rigorous analytical assumptions and protocols, while archaeological theorists are debating the validity of key concepts around foodways and the lessons archaeologists might bring to food futures. In the shorter-term, we can expect further growth in science-driven food studies, notably at the molecular level of analysis, that will shed new light on past human diets. Hopefully, we will also see more research integrating laboratory science with cultural study, that, for example, deepens understanding of the multi-sensory dimensions of past food and foodways, pays greater consideration to socially diverse experiences of food, and compares the long-term sustainability of traditional food practices in different regions of the world.

Robin Skeates
Durham, UK, 1 August 2026

[27] E.g. Hendy, J. *et al.* 2018. Ancient proteins from ceramic vessels at Çatalhöyük West reveal the hidden cuisine of early farmers. *Nature Communications* 9. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-06335-6

[28] E.g. Juhola, T. *et al.* 2019. Phytoliths, parasites, fibers and feathers from dental calculus and sediment from Iron Age Luistari cemetery, Finland. *Quaternary Science Reviews* 222. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2019.105888

[29] E.g. Smith, A. & N.F. Miller (ed.). 2009. Integrating plant and animal data: delving deeper into subsistence. Introduction to the Special Section. *Current Anthropology* 50: 883–84. https://doi.org/10.1086/605867; VanDerwarker, A.M. & T.M. Peres (ed.). 2010. *Integrating zooarchaeology and paleoethnobotany: a consideration of issues, methods and cases*. New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-0935-0

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