

Appendix.  
People, food and society:  
Towards an interdisciplinary research initiative on the  
dynamics of food production, nutrition, health and  
society from prehistory to the present

*Lars Jørgensen, Mette Marie Hald, Mads Dengsø Jessen,  
Morten Fischer Mortensen, and Niels Lynnerup*

Abstract

The National Museum of Denmark proposes to launch an interdisciplinary research initiative focusing on a number of factors that are highly relevant to and of global interest for our modern society. The initiative, entitled “People, Food and Society”, is partly the result of a major and critical assessment of the strengths, academically and collection-wise, of the Museum. The National Museum of Denmark has access to an extensive and unique body of material that can elucidate the dynamic interaction of food production, nutrition and culture. The Museum has built up extensive collections of archaeological and historical material and data, spanning a period of almost 15,000 years. The research initiative employs a collaborative research platform involving the humanities as well as the social and scientific disciplines. Within this interdisciplinary collaboration, “People, Food and Society” will investigate the economic, technological and cultural developments connected with the production and consumption of food through the ages and compare our results with data on human health and nutrition in order to identify the possible underlying causes and dynamics. In order to explore the current state of research in the participating disciplines, a two-day symposium was organized under the aegis of The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters’ outreach initiative “Open Academy”. Many of the symposium contributions are presented in this publication as peer-reviewed papers. This appendix outlines the aims of “People, Food and Society” and underlines the research potential of tapping into the archives and collections of long-standing research institutions in order to produce a fresh perspective on old material.

## Introduction

Anthropological studies show that patterns of action from the past can survive as socially inherited characteristics in human beings today (Latour 2013). The actions and decisions of the present can therefore be traced back to patterns of action that can perhaps already be observed in prehistoric times. In this perspective, museum collections make up a unique body of source material for the identification, interpretation and understanding of these embedded patterns.

Since the establishment of the Danish National Museum in 1807, prehistoric and historical cultural remains have been systematically collected from every county in Denmark. The gathering of such data has often been followed by archaeological excavations and descriptions of historical environments and related archaeological contexts. At the same time geo-referenced databases have been established covering all types of archaeological remains – buildings, settlements, graves and votive finds.

Full-scale, integrative analyses of these collections will make it possible to elucidate the timing of the introduction of new food types and dietary habits as well as the concomitant changes in husbandry practices and mobility patterns, and – not least – the significance of these innovations in terms of social change. Changes in food technologies and agricultural practices may provide the background for, or be a direct result of, major social changes, such as the shift from small-scale egalitarian societies to large-scale complex societies.

## The research initiative

The National Museum of Denmark proposes to launch an interdisciplinary research initiative entitled “People, Food and Society”. The point of departure for this initiative is the National Museum’s extensive collections of archaeological, historical and ethnological objects and data. The museum’s collections include “traditional” archaeological materials such as large assemblages of ceramics, lithics and architectural data, as well as material from around 60,000 soil samples taken for archaeobotanical analysis. To

these can be added around 75,000 pollen samples. Both of these latter sample types were taken with a view to describing the range of crops and well as the economic and natural conditions in prehistory, and they are invaluable for the elucidation of food production in prehistoric and early historical times. Moreover, the Danish Museum of Natural History holds the collected faunal material from c. 3,000 deposits, most of which have emerged in connection with archaeological excavations, especially from Danish prehistory and the Middle Ages.

In addition to its vast holdings in historical and archaeological materials and data, the National Museum has a unique anthropological collection of human remains, mainly from graves and wetland finds, with a very strong research potential in terms of information embodied in the individuals as regards physique and activity, health, nutrition and provenance. This information can be extracted by analyses of ancient DNA and the stable isotope composition of various tissues. The collection, which is curated by the Anthropological Laboratory at the University of Copenhagen, comprises approximately 25,000 individuals from the period 8000 BCE – 1500 CE.

The museum’s recent historical collections from the period after 1660 CE include extensive descriptions of everyday life in a variety of social and cultural groups, as a result of the systematic collection of objects, and several thousand reports, from the 19th–20th centuries.

From the recent period of 1900–1970 the museum has collected up to 50,000 life stories dealing with working conditions, food and meals, and housekeeping (butchering, baking, harvesting, and the collecting of wild berries and plants) in relation to everyday life as well as major feasts and ceremonies.

## Theory and methodology

“People, Food and Society” will work on the basis of a theoretical platform that covers the various material culture and data types. Adaptation and innovation are discussed within cognitive theory (cf. Malafouris & Renfrew 2010; Renfrew 2012), and will take a central

position within the project. A cognitive approach, whether in history, ethnology, archaeology or science, will thus focus on the mental information processing of human beings and their experience-based responses to influences. The basic premise is that human beings can be considered to have built up meaningful understandings of the surrounding world, which are preserved today in more or less fragmentary form in the material and written culture<sup>1</sup>. These different types of material structures will inevitably be passed on to the next generations, thus constituting a man-made environment that future generations act and live within.

This premise has a twofold influence on the project. Firstly, this type of environmental heritage forms the backbone of any type of archaeological excavation and the research done within “People, Food and Society” makes use of the different types of recovered traces from such excavations. The traces might be very obvious such as the large-scale organization of the cultivated landscape formed by several centuries of farming, ranging over more individual features such as prehistoric grave goods or personal diaries, to the ‘invisible’ diet data preserved within a person’s hair, skin and bone. Each of these types of source demands specific methodologies as represented by the individual study area, but they also interact due to the fact that they all are generated through people’s personal actions in the past.

Secondly, the theoretical perspective will underline a distributed character of humans acting in the world. That is to be understood as an intrinsic part of the aforementioned cognitive standpoint, for the reason that the studied materials bear witness to, among other things, human actions and strategic choices in connection with internal as well as external influences. Inter-

nal in the sense of a conceptual, or meaningful, behaviour pertaining to the mind of the (prehistoric) agent, and external as (foremost) intentional acts leaving behind some kind of physical trace to be analysed as part of the project. The theoretical platforms therefore regard humans, animals, artefacts, social structures and environmental influences as equal actors in the creation of society. In relation to “People, Food and Society”, this implies that the physical environment as well as the cultural practices humans are exposed to and act within, will form an essential cause for certain traditions and practices to rise or be maintained. In addition, such a theoretical standpoint provides an alternative, explanatory platform for social constructivism and relativism, which has dominated culture studies in the later parts of the 20th century.

Conclusively, the analytical and theoretical basis of “People, Food and Society” will render possible a description in which the select range of methodologies presented by the project can generate a renewed understanding of people, food and society in a long-term historical development. In essence, cognitive theory underlines the interdependency between mindful behaviour and the material record presently at our disposal. More specifically, by embracing the notion of cognitive theory the project mitigates an outdated and unnecessary distance often registered between more classical science studies and the humanities. The aims of the research initiative, outlined below, follow this approach.

## Aims of the research initiative

With “People, Food and Society” we wish to investigate the dynamic interrelations among cultural, social, economic and health-related factors since the arrival of the first human beings in Denmark until the present day. The initiative focuses on three themes that will be used to investigate the historical background to, and perspectives associated with, a number of the major issues of the present.

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1. These ideas also draw inspiration from Bruno Latour’s argument that meaning is created in the network between material objects and social relations (Latour 2005). His basic principle can be formulated as “meaning must be reconfigured within heterogeneous networks comprised of collectivities of humans, materials, media and other companion species” (Latour 1993, 136), thus creating a symmetrical and equal relationship between the different influences humans are exposed to and relate to.

### People

- *What connections can be observed between the composition of the human diet and states of health through the ages?*
- *When do so-called lifestyle diseases emerge, and what are the factors underlying them?*
- *How does human mobility relate with the distribution of certain types of food tolerance/intolerance in European populations?*

### Food

- *What economic, technological and climatic factors are involved in changes in food production and resources?*
- *What strategies are developed with a view to the maintenance of food security? How do cultural perceptions of food play a role in innovation and technology?*

### Society

- *What changing relationships can be observed over time among access to resources, power and the ritualization of food?*
- *How do societies express their social and cultural responses to issues such as environmental and resource stresses?*
- *What strategies and cultural perceptions can be observed in the interactions involved in food consumption, meals and communities?*
- *How is inequality and differential access to resources reflected in human health conditions both in the past and the present?*

Interdisciplinary surveys have documented that the prospects offered by the coordination of approaches to the history of food in the sciences and the humanities are highly promising, not least given the rapid development of new scientific methods of analysis (e.g. Steckel & Rose 2002).

Today we see a tendency – especially in the media – to focus on monocausal explanatory models for human reactions to crises and climate change. However, the historical perspective shows that interactions among factors such as food crises, innovation, adaptation and culture are often far more complex. There are always several convergent factors where a number of

natural and human actors generate changes and adaptations. “People, Food and Society” intends to investigate both long- and short-term changes and to discuss these complex dynamics.

By integrating a full range of disciplines, with their varied perspectives, in the investigations of the interaction between people, food and society, we shall be able to get a much more nuanced view of food production and its consequences through time than would have been possible when following just one or some of the strands of data available to us.

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