

# Food as embodied material culture: diversity and change in plant food consumption in Roman Britain

Marijke van der Veen

## Food as embodied material culture

Food is an area of human life that is intimately linked with both biology and culture. The phrase 'you are what you eat' refers both to the effect food has on one's physical well-being and on the rôle food plays in the expression of one's social and cultural identity. Dietler (2007, 222-23) has fittingly described food as "embodied material culture", a special type of material culture created specifically to be destroyed through ingestion into the human body. He warns, however, that food consumption is neither simply taking on fuel, nor simply the consumption of signs; it also concerns relations of production and exchange and is thus linked to both domestic and political economies. Because food is closely connected with the formation of social and cultural identities, it can form an illuminating topic of study in the context of Roman Britain, for the emergence of multiple identities in that era has been a recent research focus (e.g., Eckardt 2005; James and Millett 2001; Mattingly 2004 and 2006). Here the archaeobotanical evidence for food consumption in Britain is reviewed, concentrating on non-staple foods (fruits, nuts, vegetables, herbs, spices, oil seeds, and wild food plants). The archaeobotanical dataset (514 sites) is analysed with the aim of identifying who consumed which foods, what regional and/or social differentiation existed, and what changes occurred over time.

The impact of the Roman presence on British society and British agriculture has been the subject of considerable debate. The changes observed have often been studied in terms of 'Romanization', a concept emphasizing conformity and describing the hierarchical process of passing down supposedly superior Roman culture and technology to the people of a new province, using the simple opposition of Romans *versus* Britons. Yet it is increasingly evident that the processes that took place resulted in more complex and varied identities than the term 'Romanization' conveys (James and Millett 2001; Mattingly 2004 and 2006; Webster 2001). Rather than start from a Romano-centric approach and taking a 'top-down' view of British society, this study focuses on the whole of Britain, including those areas never occupied by Rome and those settlements not showing visible signs of Roman influence. By using a contextual approach, I hope to reveal evidence for the emergence of different consumer groups, thereby contributing to the growing body of evidence for diversity and change in Roman Britain.

Food encompasses more than just plant foods. Meat and dairy products, manufactured foods such as fish sauce, olive oil and wine, the containers used to cook, store and transport the food, as well as texts describing their supply, are equally important data for study, but they lie outside the scope of this paper (see, e.g., Bowman 2003; Cool 2006; Grant 2004; King 1999; Lauwerier 2002).

## The archaeobotanical evidence

### *Archaeobotanical data*

Archaeobotany is concerned with the study of plant remains (primarily macro fossils such as grains, seeds, nutshells, and fruit stones) recovered from excavations. These remains are used to reconstruct key aspects of human societies, such as past agricultural systems, human impact on vegetation, dietary breadth, trade in foodstuffs, and social access to specific foods. The accuracy of reconstructions is entirely dependent on the quality of the data available for study. The dataset for Roman Britain has recently been assessed (Van der Veen *et al.* 2007), with lacunae highlighted and research priorities formulated. There are currently 514 sites (representing 639 records; see below for the definition of a 'record') with archaeobotanical data available, but their distribution is biased towards the E and S parts of the country (fig. 1A).

Without some special mechanism for preservation, dead plant tissues on or in the ground normally decay after a number of years. The mode of preservation of archaeobotanical data is