

Introduction to Historical Food Research

Eulalia Piebakere
An Tir May Crown, AS L

Lecture and discussion; 1 hour

No charge; digital handout available; note-taking materials recommended

What constitutes a primary source when doing food research? The answer may surprise you! Learn about a powerful synthesis approach to documenting historical food, that is particularly valuable for cultures without written recipes. Time permitting, instructor will also share some of her recently completed projects and documentation, offering practical tips for writing food and cooking documentation for an SCA context.

In the SCA, the first piece of research advice you'll get (well, after "don't try to back-document a project you've already completed") is that you must know the difference between a primary and a secondary source. Generally, we define a primary source as an actual historical item (or text) and a secondary source is a modern interpretation of those historical sources. So if you're researching clothing, a primary source would be an extant historical garment while a secondary source would be a modern book about medieval clothing.

Here's a question for you: what's a primary source for historical cooking? You can't go to a museum and see (much less eat) the wedding feast of Henry and Matilda. Recreating historical food will *always* require you to synthesize multiple research strands. That's the fundamental purpose behind this lesson: all of these types of sources that I describe build on each other, and the strongest research makes use not only of multiple individual sources but multiple strands of research and analysis.

Here are the categories into which I split available evidence:

Culinary Manuscripts

- Description: Medieval recipes and cookbooks. Some medieval culinary texts are brief records from royal accounts while others are mass-produced cookbooks for home chefs.
- What to look for: The best ones will give you the original recipe, a translation where needed, and scholarly notes; avoid sources that give modern recipes without including the original source material as these are basically useless.
- Tips: Consider the context and purpose of each work! Not all culinary texts were cookbooks, and there is a lifetime of research that could be done on any one text to fully unpack it. Look for well-respected editors and translators, and know that there are always pitfalls when reading a translation.
- Examples: The Medieval Kitchen, *Forme of Cury*

Other Writing (and Pictures)

- Description: Any other written work produced in period -- health or medical treatises, herbals, bestiaries, farming manuals, diaries, letters, poetry, fiction (written in the Middle Ages, not about the Middle Ages); this is also where I classify miniatures and paintings.
- What to look for: As above, look for a translation plus original plus scholarly notes.
- Tips: Again, consider the context and purpose of each work and watch out for translation errors. You also need to be wary of allegory, especially in fiction and in images (and extra especially when those images serve a religious / iconographic function).
- Examples: Paston family letters, Pepys's diary (post-medieval), London Lickpenny (a 15th century poem), Norse sagas

Archeological Evidence (for ingredients / foodstuffs)

- Description: Physical finds (like pollen, seeds, and bones) and isotope analysis
- What to look for: Usually in journals, sometimes conference proceedings, sometimes books
- Tips: You can often specialize by time period, place, or even ingredient, and I've come across really cool comparative works. This is great for cultures without written records -- peasants, Vikings, early Celts, etc. and to understand changes in food over time. This is where I mention that medieval apples were not like modern apples, and encourage you to do some research to learn the differences :)
- Examples: My favorite source, which is [Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition](#)

Material Culture

- Description: Buildings (kitchens, garden layout, malting houses, location of butchers within cities and towns, etc.), tools, dishes, utensils, etc. etc. etc.
- What to look for: Books, journals, York Archeological Society (and similar), museums (try writing for specific item details)
- Tips: Can be a really interesting interpretive exercise -- are there lots of glass cups in location X because people were wealthy or because they were making production pieces? Using replica tools has helped me better comprehend historical cooking.
- Example: York Trust work, Museum of London books, replica objects made by people who specialize in other arts (glass, pottery, blacksmithing, etc.), museum pieces

In all of this, keep in mind the idea of *survival bias*; why written records or physical objects has survived is often significant, and needs to be part of your interpretation. Don't lose hope if you can't find every source for your specific project of interest -- I'm really interested in researching the food of English commoners during the High Middle Ages, and they didn't write cookbooks, but I've been able to research around this enough to be able to make some pretty confident claims. The broader your research base, the more confidently you will be able to say "During (time period), people ate (food) prepared by (method) using (ingredients), *and this is why they did that and this is how I know.*" For me, it's that last part that's the most powerful, and why I have taken so much value from this synthesis approach to food research.

On top of that, what sets the SCA apart is that we don't just read about this stuff, we try to actually do it. I'd put forth that THAT is actually where the magic happens; I can't articulate how much I've learned about food by making food. Great research is an interaction between what you take in and what you produce; the information you take in informs what you produce, and what you produce helps you better interpret the information you take in. So I close by wishing you happy researching and happy cooking!