

INTRODUCTION

“Les animaux se repaissent ; l’homme mange ;
l’homme d’esprit seul sait manger.”
(Brillat-Savarin 1842, 1)

“When archaeologists of the future come to study the stratification of London, it may be that the rise of the teacup and the relative decline of the beer-bottle will be regarded as marking a decisive stage in the history of the British Empire.”
(Clark 1939, 153)

As we wake up every morning, preparing for a day at work, dressing for school, or simply enjoying a day off, we open the coffee machine, take a slice of bread, or fancy a bowl of cereal—a daily ritual in the preparation of the most important meal of the day. Unconsciously, we repeat these actions, integral to the most basic notion of our routine. Food has this effect. It is what we continuously consider unconsciously. If this is not occurring during our three meals a day, coffee breaks during downtime, or some manner of snack, then we plan the shopping list or invite friends, colleagues, or a date for a drink. The mother alerts to the needs of the baby; the grandpa watches his cholesterol. The fan prepares chicken wings and beers for Sunday night football, while the bride dreams of the perfect cake. Food is inherent to who we are as individuals and groups. It is part of our daily life, of the small and grand celebrations, anchored in our beliefs and traditions. It comforts us and elevates our souls alike. It is one of the final bonds linking all generations.

When Jean A. Brillat-Savarin distinguished humans from animals in their aptitude to think about food, eating became a symbolic and meaningful act. When we eat, we are the only species on Earth that incorporate our food. In this process, the product becomes us. We objectify food, give it meaning, and extend it as a reflection of ourselves and our values. Externally, it creates a sense of us and defines the others. Food is no longer solely a means for survival but rather a gateway to our identity. Beyond the individual, food is at the heart of societies and at the foundation of our civilizations. In transforming from hunter-gatherers foraging the land to self-producers for our own needs, humans have innovated and built incredible tools and strategies that have led to self-sufficiency (e.g. Westropp 1872; Childe 1936; Demoule 2008).

Great civilizations have organized complex production networks, created a specialized workforce, transformed the landscape into an agrarian economy, and established marketplaces (e.g. Gumerman 1997; Childe 1936). Nowadays, we

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have industrialized our food production, modified genomes for optimal results, accelerated distribution, eased acquisition, and we globalized our taste (e.g. Ritzer 2000; Inglis and Gimlin 2013; Bawa and Anilakumar 2013; Nützenadel and Frank 2008).

Although access to food has greatly increased, famine continues to devastate many parts of the world, with more than 15 percent of the world's population being undernourished. According to a 2019 report by the United Nations, more than 820 million people suffer from hunger. In its 2018 iteration, the Global Nutrition Report observed an “unacceptably high” level of malnutrition, with more than 22.2 percent of the world's child population being stunted (FAO et al. 2019, 2018). They reported, however, that we are well equipped to face this challenge if only the world's goodwill could be mobilized. On the other hand, industrial and prosperous countries face serious problems with obesity and related health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer (WHO 2018; Anand et al. 2015; Ford and Mokdad 2008). The American Medical Association observed an alarming growth of obesity in the United States, with numbers approaching 40 percent of the population (Henry 2018). With such disparities between hunger and an overweight population, there is a clear imbalance in the distribution and accessibility of food despite general improvements in modes of production. Nevertheless, awareness of food production and consumption has grown over the years. New trends based on health benefits, encouraging local markets, welcoming and celebrating alterity in dishes, and caring for waste and overproduction have gained increasing popularity.

But where does the story begin? Where did the changes occur, the point of no return, the moment at which humanity became dependent on agrarian resources? Most archaeologists and historians agree that the transition from foraging to farming marks the beginning of this new lifestyle (e.g. Bellwood 2005; Demoule 2008; Smith 1976; Aurenche and Kozłowski 2015; Thrall, Bever, and Burdon 2010). During the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods, hunter-gatherers roamed the landscape in search of their next meal. They acquired a deep knowledge of their environment and the behavioral traits of the plants and animals coexisting with them. They learned to survive in harsh climates, adapting their food to their needs and living in cooperation with nature. In such a manner, however, Palaeolithic and Mesolithic people were also dependent on their surroundings, subject to the availability of resources (e.g. Childe 1936; Leroi-Gourhan 1964a; Demoule 2008; Meller 2016).

As these groups developed new technological innovations—first rudimentary stone tools, then the ability to master fire, and finally the domestication of canines and the refinement of their toolkits—they cultivated the notion of control and self-production. Through the mastery of fire, a seed of possibilities was

planted, and the idea that nature could be, to a certain degree, controlled became ever more feasible. They ventured outside of their comfort zones, learned about the intricate world they inhabited, tamed the sea, climbed mountains, and discovered a great variety of plants and animals, expanding their horizons to a diverse menu.

The beginning of a farming economy lies in this premise. As we enter the earliest phase of the Neolithic (Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) ca. 11,500 to 10,800 calBC and Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) ca. 8,800 to 6,500 calBC), communities within the Near East and the Levant established permanent villages, domesticated animals (e.g. dogs, sheep, and goats), and cultivated plants (e.g. einkorn, emmer, and barley) (e.g. Weiss, Kislev, and Hartmann 2006; Kuijt and Finlayson 2009; Bellwood 2005; Nesbitt 2004; Chazan 2017). They transitioned from a foraging lifestyle to self-sufficiency, meaning greater control and an expanded ability to make choices. If, nowadays, we consider farming as something inherent to our society and fused with our own lifestyle, then the first step towards this state would have been decisive. It generated a situation from which modern societies have found it nearly impossible to return. It transformed human cultures, their self-awareness, social development, economic power, and political views—indeed, all facets of who we are today. Although it was not always immediately accepted by many hunter-gatherer communities, it still resulted in a global phenomenon.

Furthermore, the Neolithic brought an array of sociocultural and technological developments. From new forms of ritual practices to a growing interest in clay artforms, Neolithic communities thrived on new possibilities (e.g. Childe 1956; Thomas 1999; Cauvin 1994). Around 7000 calBC, Near Eastern and Levantine populations reached a significant technological achievement with the appearance of pottery¹ (e.g. Maisels 2003; Rice 1999; Khatchadourian 2018; Biton, Goren, and Goring-Morris 2014; Moore 1995; Gibbs 2015). Clay manipulation and its transformation into a permanent state through fire were already known, but the creation of clay vessels enabled new possibilities. People could now create durable and impervious storage vessels, sets of plates, bowls, cups, and, more importantly, new cooking apparatus, leading to advanced techniques of food preparation. These vessels enabled steady simmering that gelatinized grains, rendered fats, aided dairy processing, and improved safety and digestibility. This development sparked a culinary revolution. Food could now be readily boiled, fried, and stirred, creating a new relationship between fire and food.

1. The earliest evidence of pottery, however, hails from East Asia, where clear examples date back to approximately 18,000 calBP in southern China, and around 17,000 to 13,000 calBC in Japan and Russia (e.g. Keally et al. 2004; Keally, Taniguchi, and Kuzmin 2003; Wu et al. 2012; Boaretto et al. 2009).

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Not long after the domestication of plants and animals and the advent of pottery making, people from Anatolia began to settle in other regions. The arrival of these farmers in Southeast Europe marks a pivotal moment in the expansion of farming and its entry point into Europe. It was long thought that this expansion occurred gradually and without resistance, eventually spreading across the continent. This view was based on the belief that agriculture represented a lifestyle superior to foraging (e.g. Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza 1971; Bogucki and Crabtree 2004; Arnaud 1982; Zilhão 1993). However, subsequent studies have demonstrated that this model is no longer defensible. Instead, a more complex progression, involving local initiatives, took place (e.g. Dennell 1992; Borić 2005b; Whittle et al. 1996; Zvelebil 2001; Thomas 1999; Barker et al. 1985; Tilley 1994).

The aims of this study are to reassess the beginnings of Neolithic farming in Southeast Europe through the exploration of food habits in the region and to reevaluate the concept of food culture in archaeological research, thereby enhancing our interpretations of past sociocultural development. Given the vast expanse of Southeast Europe, this study focuses specifically on the arrival of farming communities in modern Serbia, Bulgaria, and the Carpathian Basin, with a brief consideration of Romania. The cultural landscape of these regions, known as the Starčevo-Körös complex, offers an ideal setting to investigate the complex nature of food choice and cultural contacts. These areas provide one of the rare examples of an uninterrupted transition from a foraging economy to farming, situated in the Iron Gates. Furthermore, evidence indicates that the local Mesolithic populations did not abandon their traditional ways but instead interacted with the newcomers (e.g. Borić 2005b; Borić and Price 2013; Mathieson et al. 2017; Hofmanová et al. 2016; Fernández et al. 2014). Such a research environment is ideal for observing not only economic exchanges but also how food habits contributed to defining social grouping and identities (Weber 1922).

This investigation follows the hypothesis that the consumption of food must be regarded as a choice leading to the development of food culture. Methodologically, it is based on a set of data from residue analyses conducted on samples from selected sites (i.e. Nova Nadezhda, Yabalkovo, Blagotin, Divostin, Grivac, Lepenski Vir, Schela Cladovei, Alsónyék, Szakmár, and Ecsegfalva 23) within the mentioned area. In a second step, these results are compared to findings from zooarchaeological studies. For the interpretation, a sociocultural perspective on the food culture of Early Neolithic societies is applied, presenting the major contribution of this research.

For too long, archaeological interpretations of the first farmers revolved around economic strategies, optimal production, cost/benefits, and adaptability processes (e.g. Miracle and Milner 2002; Twiss 2012; Hastorf 2016). Although these approaches are consequential, they fail to report on the people and societies

behind the economic factors and their ability to make choices. Without discarding such approaches, the present research focuses on the concept of food culture and its importance within the broader narrative. It contributes to addressing the research gaps described and offers a new perspective on food habits. Central to the notion of neolithization, food studies in prehistoric contexts have received little attention in terms of sociocultural traits. By reintegrating them into the study of this transformative period, it is hoped that some aspects of our understanding of the events might be clarified and that a new dialogue of emergent possibilities might be initiated.

To recognize the extent of food culture, an overview of the accomplishments of various specialists in food studies, including sociology, psychology, and especially anthropology, is necessary. In Chapter 1, a review of past research, particularly by ethnologists, will introduce the variability and limits in questioning food habits while aiding in framing the theoretical and methodological approach. For this purpose, the concept of the Neolithic is not as clearly defined as it may seem. Variations in nomenclature, periodization, technological associations, and conceptualizations have fueled debates within many archaeological circles (e.g. Childe 1936; Smolla 1960; Demoule 2008; Hodder 1990; Thomas 1991; Zvebil 1998).

In Chapter 2, an exploration of the neolithization process in its historical and methodological perspectives will provide an account of these debates and definitions. This is essential for shedding light on the current state of research. This will be followed by a description of the development of farming in Southeast Europe, focusing on the Starčevo-Körös complex. To enable comparisons, this discussion will be preceded by a brief overview of Bulgarian and Aegean developments.

Complementing the theoretical framework, organic lipid residue analyses were performed to enrich the data in our possession. With the last three decades witnessing significant advancements in organic chemistry and lipid recognition in archaeological contexts, Chapter 3 will present the results obtained from a selection of ten sites in Bulgaria, Serbia, and the Carpathian Basin, totaling some 409 potsherds analyzed. This method permits the extraction of lipids contained in potsherds and their identification as commodities related to non-ruminant adipose fats (e.g. pig, dog, fish), ruminant adipose fats (e.g. sheep, goats, cattle), and ruminant dairy fats (e.g. milk, cheese, butter). While this technique has proven its efficiency over time, no inter-site research on lipid residues from the Balkans and Carpathian Basin during the Early Neolithic has been conducted prior to this study. To further complement these findings, this section will also include a compilation of known Early Neolithic faunal data from the Aegean and the Balkans, as these data are vital as a point of comparison.

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Through the combination of results from lipid analysis, past zooarchaeological research, and a theoretical framework focusing on food culture, Chapter 4 will provide a first glimpse of a new perspective on the development of food habits in the Starčevo-Kőrös complex. The objective is to reintegrate sociocultural questions into the discourse on the beginning of farming and to navigate through the available evidence (i.e. genetics, residue analysis, faunal remains, archaeological material) in search of food patterns that serve as markers of a newly constructed European identity.