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Cooking the Neolithic in the Rhineland: Reconstructing the Diet of the Linearbandkeramik Culture through Experiment

This project explores the diet of the Linearbandkeramik (LBK) culture in the Rhineland and examines how far pre-historic meals can be reconstructed based on archaeological evidence. The LBK culture (5500–4900 BCE) was among the earliest farming communities in Central Europe and played a key role in the spread of agriculture. While archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological data provide a good overview of available food resources, they reveal little about how these ingredients were actually prepared and combined in everyday life. This gap makes it difficult to understand past diets beyond individual food items and was the main motivation for this experiment.

This project is based on the analysis of archaeological and archaeobotanical literature in order to identify existing foods to reconstruct the dietary basis of the LBK population in the Rhineland. Particular attention was paid to cultivated crops such as einkorn and emmer, legumes, animal products and the possible role of wild plants. Following experimental-archaeological approaches previously applied to other periods and regions, the cooking experiment served as a complementary method for testing how archaeologically attested resources can be translated into plausible meals. Based on these findings, a multi-course menu was developed, prepared and tested with participants. Their feedback was collected through questionnaires and analysed qualitatively by comparing numerical ratings with open-ended responses on taste, acceptance and perception.

The results show that the LBK culture had access to a diverse range of food resources and preparation methods. While the main components of the LBK diet can be identified relatively clearly, the reconstruction of specific dishes remains uncertain. The evidence nevertheless suggests a more varied diet than is often assumed. In particular, the available archaeobotanical data indicate that wild plants may have played a bigger role in food consumption than is visible from traditional interpretations of the archaeological record. The practical experiment demonstrated that a varied menu can be created using only ingredients that were available during the LBK period. Participant feedback was generally positive: all participants stated that they would eat the menu again, with the flatbread and the meat-herb combination being especially well received, while the wild-plant sidedish and the stew produced more mixed reactions.

This project contributes to a better understanding of the possibilities and limits of reconstructing past diets from archaeological evidence. Since direct written or oral evidence for LBK food practices is unavailable, such experimental approaches are especially valuable for exploring what forms of food preparation may have been possible in Neolithic communities, including different uses of wild plants or animal products, rather than aiming to identify one definitive prehistoric recipe. It highlights the interpretative nature of dietary reconstructions and demonstrates how experimental approaches can complement traditional archaeological research by exploring plausible forms of food preparation and consumption. It also implies how knowledge about prehistoric food culture can inform current discussions on resource use and dietary diversity. Future research could further investigate regional differences within the LBK and compare alternative plausible reconstructions of meals and preparation methods.