

# Friday Seminar

Fall 2024

Oct 18

1:00 - 2:30pm (NAH 114)

## Finding the food of the past:

**Using plant remains from archaeological sites to understand diet, agriculture, environment and culture in the Indus Civilization of South Asia 3200-1500BC**

Food is a crucial part of life. Not only does food sustain us physically, but the acts of acquiring, preparing and eating food allow us to make statements about who we are, our identity(s) and thus to shape our interactions on a daily basis. Despite this, food remains an elusive element of archaeology, often because of an unwillingness to approach it analytically - we typically stop at 'diet' rather than food as a concept. In this presentation the basics of archaeobotany, the study of plant remains from archaeological sites will be introduced, and how new theoretical and methodological approaches are delving into the realm of food and challenging us to think about this tricky subject. Case studies from South Asia will be used to illustrate how, with careful consideration of the material, we can go beyond the agricultural or dietary implications of variation in plant presence to look at how people perceived 'food' as a social material. The main case study will be the Indus Civilisation (c.3200-1500BC), though a few other examples from across the subcontinent will also be shown to add some 'flavour' to the paper. The Indus Civilisation was one of the largest old world Bronze Age civilisations, covering modern day Pakistan and northern India, extending into Afghanistan. The Indus consisted of five large urban sites and thousands of smaller settlements, with a shared material culture, including red and black ceramic style, stamp seals, 'script', and use of semi-precious stones like carnelian and lapis lazuli. The Indus was also part of vast trading networks, linking it to Mesopotamia, Oman, Bahrain and beyond. As a result of its geographic extent and the wide range of environmental regions it encompassed, the Indus was a hotbed of agricultural experimentation. However, this agricultural variation was also due to its location at the cross roads of trade, bringing it into contact with a wide variety of potential ingredients. These included indigenous small millets and tropical pulses and more exotic crops from China such as rice, African millets, and Eurasian crops like wheat, barley, peas and lentils. This paper will show that with some nuanced analysis, food can be used to think about urbanism, rural staples and exotic luxuries, and how these link into models of Indus identity, social organisation and trade.

**Jennifer Bates** is Assistant Professor of Archaeological Science at Seoul National University, South Korea. She specialises in the archaeobotany of South Asia, with interests in questions relating to food use, agricultural systems development, domestication, environment and climate change. Her primary research is currently focused on rice domestication and early agriculture in the Ganges plains, with a collaborative 6 year project, the *Indica Project*, run with BHU India to explore this. Prof. Bates is also leading the *Korean Working Group* of LandCover6k, a global effort to improve Anthropogenic Land Cover Change models used in climate predictions.

