1. Introduction

In the early modern period (c. 1450-1750), the body was perceived very differently. Teachings of classical authors such as Galen and Hippocrates underpinned medicine and everyday life. The body was believed to contain four substances (humors) - blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile - the quantities of which varied in each individual. To maintain good physical and mental health, humors had to be kept in balance and this could be achieved through diet (Arikha 2007). Humoral theory has been largely ignored by archaeologists despite its centrality to early modern thinking. Instead, dietary studies have focused on economics and identity.

2. The project

This interdisciplinary research will consider the extent to which humoral theory influenced dietary behaviour in early modern England. To explore this question, a case study will be used – the diet of the Grey family who lived at Bradgate House, Leicestershire (c. 1500-1740). It is believed as they were wealthy, literate individuals they were likely candidates to have followed humoral theory. Their diet will be explored through analysis of archaeological remains (animals and plants) and documentary sources, considering changes over time.

3. Peas, an example

Peas were consumed at Bradgate, and the archaeological and historical records for other post-medieval sites suggests their consumption increased c.1450-1750, and this has been associated with the rise of botanists, expanding trade networks and elite identity (Thirsk 2006). However, humoral theory could provide a new insight into why this occurred, adding to previous interpretations. Early dietary writers (in regimens, recipe books etc.) regarded peas as nutritious for the poor and labourers but not the elite. Their status and popularity began to increase over time as peas were portrayed as a wholesome life-saving food in times of starvation (Orford miracle 1555 - see Stowe 1580). From c. 1600 elites were trading 'good' seeds and peas were included in high-class dining recipes.

4. Questions

Further research will address:

- What other foods were consumed at Bradgate?
- How does this compare to other elite English sites?
- What can early modern sources disclose about the humoral values of foods, do these change over time?
- To what extent does the archaeological/historical evidence follow the dietary advice given?
- How does humoral theory interplay with other factors such as identity, religion and economics?

Bibliography: