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978-0-521-89842-3 - Ancestral Appetites: Food in Prehistory

Kristen J. Gremillion

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ANCESTRAL APPETITES

This book explores the relationship between prehistoric people and their food – what they ate, why they ate it, and how researchers have pieced together the story of past foodways from material traces. Contemporary human food traditions encompass a seemingly infinite variety, but all are essentially strategies for meeting basic nutritional needs developed over millions of years. Humans are designed by evolution to adjust our feeding behavior and food technology to meet the demands of a wide range of environments through a combination of social and experiential learning. In this book, Kristen J. Gremillion demonstrates how these evolutionary processes have shaped the diversification of human diet over several million years of prehistory. She draws on evidence extracted from the material remains that provide the only direct evidence of how people procured, prepared, presented, and consumed food in prehistoric times.

Kristen J. Gremillion is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at The Ohio State University. She has published many articles on human dietary variability in journals including *American Antiquity*, *Current Anthropology*, and *Journal of Archaeological Science* as well as chapters in several edited volumes.

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To Paul

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
admit impediments.*

Shakespeare, Sonnet 116

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

HUMAN DIETS AND THEIR CULTURAL AND EVOLUTIONARY ROOTS HAVE been at the center of my research efforts over the last two decades. In my own laboratory, I investigate paleodiet through the identification and analysis of ancient plant remains (an “arcane subspecialty,” as one acquaintance described it). Perhaps it was the recognition that the more technical aspects of the work were of interest to only a small subset of my colleagues that initially kept me from seeing that research into ancient human diets has the potential to reach a wider audience. However, there was another factor – the enormous increase in the quantity and quality of relevant data over the past few decades. New techniques for extracting information from a wide variety of archaeological materials are featured with great regularity in journals such as the *Journal of Archaeological Science*. Both methods and theoretical frameworks for better understanding human diets have proliferated in recent years, making it difficult indeed to keep up with developments.

It was during the process of trying to help students understand and work with this vast array of new information that the idea for this book began to germinate. In developing a graduate seminar on paleodiet, I decided to emphasize the variety of methods now available and what they might be able to teach us. In particular, I wanted to provide some guidance on how the various techniques, currently springing up like mushrooms after rain, could inform students’ own research. We also explored key controversies such as the role of human hunters in species extinctions, the importance of domesticates in the diets of incipient farmers, the role played by meat consumption in human evolution, and the documentation of cannibalism in the prehistoric record.

It occurred to me that most of the public was largely ignorant of these developments because so much of the information remained buried in

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specialized journals. This book was designed to correct this state of affairs by giving readers a taste of the evidence, oriented around some major transitions in human diet and food technology. So although it covers several million years of human history, it is not intended to be comprehensive; rather, I hope the book serves as a kind of “consciousness-raising” exercise (yes, I was a college student in the 1970s) that might correct the misconception that we know very little about how and what prehistoric people ate. In addition, I wanted to show how evolutionary thinking might be applied to the important business of acquiring and consuming food. We enjoy greater dietary flexibility than most species; however, this ability to improvise itself evolved in the distant past, for reasons that are still imperfectly understood. Humans also “inherit” food customs, building bodies of knowledge that accumulate over many generations and depend on the subtleties of language to invest them with meaning. Human food choices have roots in biological needs, individual preferences, and evolutionary history, but their great diversity across the globe would not exist without the system of social learning known as culture.

Many people have helped me in various ways to bring this project to fruition. I thank my colleagues who read and commented on the book prospectus and the resulting manuscript (Paul Gardner, Clark Larsen, Ken Sassaman, Greg Waselkov, and one anonymous reviewer) for generously investing their time and offering many helpful comments. This book owes its origin to my role as a teacher, and the graduate students enrolled in my paleodiet seminar in the Department of Anthropology at The Ohio State University have enriched my understanding by asking many good questions and sharing their own specialized knowledge. Over the years, many colleagues have helped me refine my ideas, both through formal critique and informal (and often beer-fueled) discussions. Although I could not possibly name them all, they include William S. (Bill) Dancey, Julie Field, Gayle Fritz, Paul Gardner, Julia Hammett, Cecil Ison, Andrew Mickelson, Katherine (Kappy) Mickelson, Dolores Piperno, Bruce Smith, Bruce Winterhalder, Jean Black Yarnell, Richard A. (Dick) Yarnell, and Melinda (Mindy) Zeder. The rest of you, I hope, know who you are, and will also accept my grateful thanks.

This book would have taken many years to complete without the support of The Ohio State University in the form of a faculty professional leave, which allowed me to devote my time to writing. Ohio State, the USDA Forest Service, the National Science Foundation, the Kentucky Heritage Council, and the National Geographic Society have

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all provided key financial support for my research projects over the years. Without it, I would not be the scholar I am today.

Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press encouraged me to develop a proposal for this book and gave me valuable advice on how to make it better. Without her input and encouragement, I suspect that the road to publication would have been much longer and rougher than it turned out to be.