

The Cavemen loved their Vegetables

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The recent discovery of a very large amount of residue from edible plants at an archaeological site dating from about 800,000 years ago suggests that the menu of prehistoric people was much more diversified than had been thought and that plants constituted the basis of their diet.

During the **Paleolithic era**, between 10,000 and 2.5 million years ago, agriculture had not yet been invented and humans lived as what we call hunter-gatherers, who fed both on products that they gathered from plants (berries, fruits, tubers, seeds, nuts and grains) and from hunting (meat and offal).

In the popular imagination, however, it is particularly the meat which occupies the predominant place in the prehistoric diet (considering things like the gigantic “brontosaurus steaks”, the odd anachronisms which fed Fred Flintstone in the cartoons). This perception has some truth to it since the bones of animals are well able to resist the passage of time and have regularly been found in association with the skeletal remains of humans at archaeological digs. But did the first humans actually eat all that much meat?

PLANT DIVERSITY

An analysis of the plant remnants found at the Geshar Benot Ya’aqov (Jacob’s Daughters Bridge) archaeological site, in Israel, casts new light on the dining habits of the Stone Age peoples living there¹. Taking advantage of the very particular geological conditions which permitted the preservation of plant remains there, the scientists demonstrated, for the first time, that the humans who lived there about 780,000 years ago utilized a very rich variety of plants for alimentary purposes.

No less than 55 edible plants could be identified, including nuts, fruits (grapes, raspberries, pears and almonds), grains, seeds, shoots and leaves, which shows the extent to which our ancestors were capable of obtaining essential foods from their environment in order to survive.

According to Dr. Amanda Harry, of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, these observations are not surprising because humans required numerous foods of plant origins in order to survive and our ancestors were consequently very likely to be predominantly vegetarian.

As well, hunting is a difficult process, rarely successful (particularly before the invention of modern weapons), and it was only by being able to count on a regular food supply from plants that our ancient ancestors were able to obtain sufficient food to eat.



LESS MEAT

Advocating the abundant consumption of plants is thus nothing revolutionary: in practice, these foods have been on the menu for humans since the beginning of time! There is also a bonus in the very positive effects these foods have on our health, because it has recently been observed that the consumption of proteins from plants rather than animals is associated with a diminution in premature mortality².

This protective effect is most important when plant proteins replace particular sources of animal proteins such as processed meats (reduction of 34% in mortality), but is also observed when they replace red meat that has not been industrially processed (12%) or when they replace eggs (19%).

The positive effect of plant proteins is most pronounced against cardiovascular mortality, in agreement with a number of studies which have shown that vegetarians and vegans exhibit a marked decrease in several risk factors for cardiovascular diseases (hypertension, cholesterol, diabetes) and are less often affected by these diseases.

It’s another reason to remember that eating an abundance of plant-based foods of all types (fruits, vegetables, beans, whole grains) with little meat and limiting the consumption of industrially processed foods overloaded with added sugars and fats remains the best option for living a long life in good health.

- (1) Melamed Y et al. The plant component of an Acheulian diet at Geshar Benot Ya’aqov, Israel. Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA 2016;113:14674-14679.
- (2) Song M et al. Association of animal and plant protein intake with all-cause and cause-specific mortality. JAMA Intern. Med. 2016;176:1453-1463.