EDITORIAL

Fish on Friday

In a few minutes a van will pull up outside our front door bringing fish landed early this morning. I'll probably buy a couple of haddock fillets (sustainably sourced) and some smoked whole mackerel (kippers) from the Isle of Man. The transaction will take two or three minutes, complete with a chat about the weather, and then the day's 'catch' will go in the fridge for cooking tonight or tomorrow. The mackerel, because of its preservation by smoking will last well into next week. Mundane, yes, but an eagerly anticipated part of the week because we like our fish and Friday isn't quite the same without it. For me this has nothing to do with religious proscriptions on eating meat; I just like fish and always have done.

Fishing was part of my youth, whether in cold, tea-coloured Canadian lakes when visiting relatives or at home in the warm, soupy waters of a Texas cattle tank. Knowing which bait to use, what size of hook, which weight of line and understanding the habits of the fish - these were all part of the skill base, developed over time, of the competent piscine predator. As with any hunting and gathering activity, the guidance of an experienced elder (my granddad) enhanced the rate of learning. Today, the eating of fish for me is just a dietary habit – the long summer afternoons by the water are a distant memory - and I suspect for most of us fish remains the only wild food regularly consumed as part of our diet (farmed salmon, sea bass or catfish aside).

So, then, to the point of this editorial.

The papers in this and the following two issues are about food, in particular patterns of consumption in the Mediterranean Basin between 50,000 and 10,000 BP, from the Middle to Epipalaeolithic. Natalie Munro and Levent Atici in their introduction to the series of twelve papers - which originated in the 2008 meeting of the Society for American Archaeology – summarise concisely the methodological and conceptual issues linked to the identification and interpretation of dietary specialisation and intensification. I won't discuss these issues further, but will comment on the striking rarity of one resource in particular – fish. Fish as opposed to shellfish appear to have been scarce in Mediterranean diets until quite late in this archaeological time frame. The evidence for Neanderthal and early Upper Palaeolithic fishing is not particularly convincing at the moment, but even if fish were part of their respective diets they weren't nutritionally or socially significant parts. It seems it was not until technological innovation made the hunting of fish (which is what fishing is) practicable, that this food source became a worthwhile pursuit in terms of energy expenditure. The development of barbed harpoons, hooks, lines, sea worthy craft all would have reduced the energetic costs of pursuing such fast moving and usually small game – the endangered Mediterranean blue fin tuna, which can reach 2 metres or more in length, is the monster of an exception that proves the rule. The relatively late development of marine fishing as a reliable and predictable subsistence strategy can probably be explained in terms of the same themes discussed in the papers here: demographic, social, and environmental stimuli that made dietary intensification worth the extra effort.

In a world of supermarkets (and doorstep delivery) it is easy to take for granted that something you like to eat is just there, where and when you want it. But that has not been the case for most of human evolution - and may not be the case in years to come, as we face the combined consequences of global warming and rapidly diminishing supplies of fossil fuels. So tonight as we tuck into our freshly caught and cooked fish n' chips I'll thank our Mesolithic forbears for their innovation of nets, hooks and fish traps and consider myself lucky for living in this time of plenty.

The Editor
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