

Book review

ARCHAEODIET IN THE GREEK WORLD: DIETARY RECONSTRUCTION FROM STABLE ISOTOPE ANALYSIS

Edited by Anastasia Papathanasiou, Michael P. Richards, and Sherry C. Fox

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Dietary patterns of ancient and historical Greeks have been the focus of philosophers, historians, and physicians for over two thousand years. Recent advances in stable isotopic analyses have afforded modern biological anthropologists and archaeologists a means to assess dietary patterns independent of material culture and frame a more nuanced understanding of the Greek diet as it changed from early Neolithic farmers to Byzantine citizens of Corinth and Athens. Often such studies are presented within symposiums, workshops, or as volunteered papers which result in excellent publications, but they are often limited in geographic range or temporal scope. *Archaeodiet in the Greek World*, consisting of 11 chapters by 12 researchers, overcomes this obstacle through the examination of over 1,000 carbon and nitrogen isotopic assays from a plethora of burials and faunal samples recovered from archaeological sites across Greece as well as the Bulgarian Greek colony of Apollonia Pontica.

The editors—Papathanasiou, Richards, and Fox—sequence the topical chapters chronologically between two introductory chapters (Chapter 1 by Papathanasiou and Fox and Chapter 2 by Richards) and a concluding summary chapter (Chapter 11 by Papathanasiou and Richards). In the conclusion, the authors synthesize the various contributions from a “big data” perspective to gain a better understanding of “nutrition, subsistence, and economy of ancient Greece and the greater Greek world” (p. 1).

While Chapter 1 describes the goals, geography, and chronology for the volume, Chapter 2 by Richards provides an excellent, concise overview of stable isotopic analysis and its application to Greek archaeology. In Chapter 3, Papathanasiou provides an overview of past isotopic research on Neolithic and Bronze Age Greece. The overview encompasses plant and animal species exploited by the ancient Greeks and presents a thorough accounting of isotopic signatures of animals from Neolithic sites on mainland Greece. Variation in these values are examined within the framework of the local ecosystems and several explanations ranging from manuring of pastures to aridity resulting in water stress are examined in an effort to explain elevated nitrogen

levels at two sites (Kephala and Franchthi). Anyone interested in isotopic research in Greece or the Eastern Mediterranean should include these early chapters on their reading list.

Chapter 4 by Triantaphyllou examines Neolithic to Early Iron Age samples from sites in Northern Greece and this contribution is excellent partner to Papathanasiou's preceding chapter with only limited data overlap. Triantaphyllou's chapter provides a synthesis of human and non-human isotopic values from Northern Greece and demonstrates a marked isotopic difference in non-coastal Early Iron Age (EIA) burials. EIA burials from this region exhibit enriched carbon and nitrogen values as compared to most Neolithic and Bronze Age burials from prehistoric Greek Macedonia, possibly suggesting an increased contribution of millet in the diet. The following two chapters (5 and 6) by Vika and Iezzi, respectfully, examine Late Bronze Age samples from commingled contexts in central Greece. The importance of these studies is that they encompass geographic areas where limited prior research had been conducted.

In Chapter 7, Panagiotopoulou and Papathanasiou present new data on the Early Iron Age site of Ayios Dimitrios, which is a welcome addition to isotopic research in Greece because only a limited number of EIA burials have been examined and the Ayios Dimitrios sample provides good evidence for the Greek diet during the “Dark Ages” (p. 105). Interestingly, the authors find that the inhabitants of Ayios Dimitrios likely did not exploit marine resources, similar to most Bronze Age Greeks. EIA diets appear to have maintained similar constituents as the earlier periods in central Greece.

Chapters 8 by Lagia deals with Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods on mainland Greece. This study offer subsistence profiles for various locations and economic settings based on cemeteries in Athens and Laurion. Interestingly, the sites show a consistent pattern of reduced dietary protein from the Classical to Roman Periods, which the author argues is indicative of “transformations in the living standards rather than random factors related to individual physiology or economic strategy” (Lagia, p. 140). The study places the diet within the framework of cosmopolitanism, imperialism, subjugation, and to a degree marginalization of Athens (and Greece) by Imperial Rome.

The final two chapters, Chapter 9 by Kwok and Keeleyside and Chapter 10 by Bourbou and Garvie-Lok, examine issues of infant feeding practices and weaning during the Classical and Byzantine Periods. Both chapters provide excellent summaries of the historical and archaeological evidence for infant feeding practices and weaning in Grecian society. Nitrogen isotopic patterns clearly show a downward trophic level shift between 1 and 3 years old supporting reported weaning intervals in Classical and later period Greek samples.

The book ends with a summary chapter (11) written by Papathanasiou and Richards. The authors take a “big data” approach to the volume and examine the pattern of mean values for a majority of the sites discussed in the book. What they see is a fairly consistent dietary signature with key oscillations related to socioeconomic and societal changes which occurred during the prehistory and history of Greece. The authors note a diversification in and differential access to animal protein and marine resources during the Bronze Age and then again in the Classical Period. Animal protein access reduces in the Late Neolithic, the Iron Age transition, the Late Classical Period, and the Byzantine Period—all low socioeconomic periods in Greece.

Overall, this is an excellent volume integrating archaeological, historical, bioarchaeological, and isotopic resources into a synthetic interpretation of the Greek diet. I praise the editors and authors for

including numerous primary data tables of both human and faunal assays. I feel the volume would have benefitted from an appendix or supplementary data table with the isotopic values compiled in a consistent format. In addition, I must mention that a couple of maps lacked referenced site locations and some of the isotopic plots were busy due to the quantity of data presented. These are minor offenses for a well-crafted compilation. If you are interested in dietary reconstruction in Greece or the Eastern Mediterranean, this book will be an essential resource.

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