Mediterranean Settlers Had Little Taste for Fish

By SINDYA N. BHANOO
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Sicilian cuisine is famous for the bounty of the Mediterranean: fish, clams, mussels, shrimp. But 20,000 years ago, around the time of the last ice age, the first modern humans who arrived in the region ate very little seafood, researchers report after studying the remains of human skeletons.

“The source of the dietary protein consumed mainly originated from the meat of medium to large terrestrial herbivores,” said the report’s first author, Marcello Mannino, an archaeologist at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany.

The remains were found in a cave on the small island of Favignana, which thousands of years ago was part of Sicily. Sicily itself was connected to the mainland by a land bridge, allowing humans to cross over.

Dr. Mannino and his colleagues did an isotopic analysis of the remains to determine what the settlers were eating. They reported their findings in the journal PLoS One.

By the time they arrived in Sicily, modern humans had yet to develop sophisticated fishing techniques. Moreover, Dr. Mannino said, the Mediterranean is an enclosed sea, poor in nutrients compared with oceanic regions. By now, he continued, overfishing has taken its toll on the sea’s marine resources.

“Modern fishing methods essentially wipe out anything that is present in a given area and then essentially destroy the sea bottom,” he said.