

Evidence found of early hunter-gatherer eating an entire venomous snake

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Image of the Viperidae fang recovered during coprolite analysis. Note venom channel. Credit: *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* (2019). DOI: 10.1016/j.jasrep.2019.03.032

A trio of researchers from Texas A&M University and Wichita State University has found evidence of an early hunter-gatherer eating an



entire venomous snake. In their paper published in *Journal of Archaeological Science*, Elanor Sonderman, Crystal Dozier and Morgan Smith describe their study of coprolites found at a site in Texas and the snake remains they found.

Back in the 1960s, archaeologists discovered a shelter once used by early hunter-gatherers in the Lower Pecos region in Texas—at the junction of the Pecos and Rio Grande rivers. In one part of the shelter, they found numerous coprolite (preserved feces) samples, suggesting it had been used as a latrine. Testing of the samples showed them to be from humans approximately 1,500 years ago. Researchers subsequently collected over 1000 coprolite samples, some of which were studied—others were put in preservation units. In this new effort, the researchers were studying some of the samples that had been preserved. They report that one of the samples held quite a surprise—an entire undigested venomous <u>snake</u>—minus one fang. They note this find was the first and only of its kind. Early hunter-gatherers were known to eat snakes, but they always cut off the heads and other parts, such as rattles and bones.

The researchers report that another sample near the one they were studying had been dated to 1,529 to 1,597 years ago. The researchers note that during that time period, the areas was hot and dry and humans would have had to subsist on <u>small animals</u> and sparse vegetation. They further report that in addition to the snake, the coprolite sample also had a small whole rodent in it. There was also evidence of several plants that the person had eaten, such as Liliaceae and Agave lechuguilla—and fibers from Dasylirion, which is similar to asparagus. They also found evidence of the person eating Opuntia, more commonly known as prickly pear cactus.

The researchers speculate that it was unlikely the snake was consumed for its <u>nutritional value</u>—such a dangerous act more likely was the result of engaging in a ritual or ceremony. They also note that the placement of



the snake encased in the coprolite made it unlikely that the snake had somehow made its way to the sample after the person had defecated.

More information: Elanor M. Sonderman et al. Analysis of a coprolite from Conejo Shelter, Texas: Potential ritualistic viperous snake consumption, *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* (2019). DOI: 10.1016/j.jasrep.2019.03.032

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