
IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS FIRE

Fire offered invaluable advantages to people: It warmed, protected against wild animals and meals could be prepared.

The heat killed germs and broke down components of the food that were difficult to digest. Roots and grains became edible and the food generally more nutritious. The people of prehistoric times needed less food through the use of fire because what they ate became more nourishing.

Anthropologists believe that cooking, in addition to the switch to a higher protein diet, contributed significantly to the development of the human brain, which tripled in size from its ancestor Homo habilis to modern humans.

Humans evolved in Africa and when they set out from there, they had already discovered the fire and took it along. As the precious food burned quickly in the open flames, the Homo species invented the first cooking techniques. Hot stones heated the food in stone depressions and earth pits. Scientists still disagree about when humans first started using fire. Recent findings in Israel date it 300,000 years earlier than previously assumed, to 960,000 years before our time.

For a long time, early humans presumably guarded and preserved fire naturally lit by lightning and forest fires. The oldest finds of stones on which humans struck sparks to light fire are 33,000 years old. Making fire with flint, steel and tinder stays a tried and tested principle.