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ARTICLE

The Caveman in the Mirror: Masculinity and Paleofantasy

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Abstract

In the early 2000s, mainstream US wellness culture started to develop something of an obsession with the distant past. These "paleofantasies" (Zuk 2013), such as barefoot running and the Paleo diet, are not based in scientific evidence about prehistoric human behavior or accurate understandings of evolutionary theory. Why, then, do so many people (especially men) find them compelling? In this paper, I argue that the "stone age" chronotope is implicitly masculine and in fact tends to exclude women altogether. Women are largely absent from imaginings of prehistory, whether those imaginings are car insurance commercials, diet and exercise programs, or even anthropological texts. Looking at various popular discourses about the stone age chronotope, I consider how women are effectively rendered invisible, leaving behind what is perceived as a distilled masculine essence. I suggest that the proliferation of paleofantasy in the past two decades has been part of a broader cultural backlash against feminist progress.

Keywords: gender; media; semiosis

Introduction: is female to male as modern man is to caveman?

In 1972, Sherry Ortner published her now-famous essay "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" In it, she argued that "the secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals" (Ortner 1972, 5), and attributed that fact to an ideological alignment of women with "nature" and men with "culture." Women, she suggested, with their leaky, gestating bodies tying them to domestic roles, are easier to see as part of the natural world, and thus as inferior to men, who solidly occupy the "culture" end of the nature/culture binary opposition.

Though this essay was met with critical responses (e.g., MacCormack and Strathern 1980) and Ortner (1996) herself would later raise questions about the supposed universality of male dominance, there are elements of the argument that seem com-

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pelling, or at least reflective of common experiences. Technology is often framed as masculine, and there are certainly situations where women are linked ideologically to nature—the figure of Mother Nature, for example. And we can also see many instances where a comparison to nature is negative and harmful, such as racist discourses describing indigenous and Black people as "barbaric" and "bestial" (Bederman 2008; Johnson 2011; Hooks 2014).

But ideological frameworks like these are never total, despite their totalizing rhetoric. Not only are hegemonic discourses inevitably met by counterdiscourses, but even those hegemonic discourses shift over time. Though the gender binary is extraordinarily pervasive and has been elaborated into nearly every domain of experience, it is not taken up in the same ways everywhere and at all times; in different contexts and at different scales, the same quality can be associated with different social groups and can be inflected with negative or positive valence. Cross-cultural research has shown, for example, that although many societies (including the US) associate passivity with women and aggression with men, there are societies where the reverse is true: men are stereotyped as indirect and quiet, and women as direct and confrontational (Keenan 1989; Kulick 1998). But in those societies, being passive is the valorized side of the spectrum, and thus women are still framed as deviant and problematic in hegemonic discourses.

Similarly, contrary to Ortner's original argument, "nature" is neither universally reviled nor universally feminized. The natural world is often a source of wonder and admiration, and prestige is often accorded to those who are "in touch with nature" or who "follow their instincts." Nature can be framed as nurturing, bountiful, and beautiful, but it can also be framed as brutal and unforgiving. All of these perspectives are present in US discourses, and the representation of nature that is brought to bear in any given situation depends on the context: who is invoking nature, addressing which audience, in order to accomplish which social goals. "Nature" acts as a mirror, always reflecting understandings of "culture," "technology," and "modernity," and as those understandings change, so too does "nature."

In this article, I argue that over the past three decades, likely as a result of anxieties brought on by economic and social change, mainstream US discourses have increasingly valorized and masculinized "nature." This has been accomplished through the popularization of what I call the "caveman chronotope," an imagined time-space in the distant past that has served as an anchor for many health and fitness fads since the early 2000s. Though the term "chronotope" has been used in several ways by different scholars (see introduction to this issue), I use it here to mean a stereotyped, imagined time-space—an ideologically constrained "world" that speakers in a particular community can make reference to and use as a basis for narrative construction, often in contrast with other chronotopes (Gal 2006; Agha 2007; Dick 2010; Stasch 2011). Originally described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), chronotopes are populated by certain types of characters who can engage in certain types of actions in service of certain types of stories. Chronotopes do not occupy precise real-world timespans or geographical borders; they are mutable, ideological constructions rather than historical fact.

The "caveman chronotope," therefore, is not the actual Paleolithic age. Rather, it is an imagined "prehistoric world" shaped by and in turn shaping the narratives that invoke it. It is also not the *only* imagined prehistoric world; there are alternative discourses

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about the ancient past, which draw on chronotopes circumscribed by different boundaries and populated by different characters. *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980), for example, is built around a novelistic chronotope that relies on the imponderabilia of everyday prehistoric life and the reader's empathy with the protagonist, which is very different from the comical chronotope at the heart of *The Croods* (2013), the GEICO Cavemen ads, or Gary Larson's *Far Side* comics. I use the term "caveman chronotope" to refer specifically to discourses that envision of our prehistoric past as a time of health, superhuman robustness, and ultimately, as I will argue, masculinity. It is deployed in contrast with a modern chronotope in which humans are sickly, fat, and effeminate, producing a narrative of decline: as the world has become more civilized and technology has advanced, humans have lost their vigor, suffering in an environment that they were never meant to live in.

I am not concerned in this article with debunking the pseudoscientific claims of the health trends that invoke the caveman chronotope; other scholars (e.g., McKinnon 2006; Zuk 2013) have already done this more than adequately. Rather, I wish to consider the ways in which these "paleofantasies" (a term coined by Leslie Aiello and repurposed by Marlene Zuk) draw on and reinscribe gender ideologies, naturalizing a constellation of gendered contrasts by projecting them across a temporal divide. Comparing text artifacts of earlier paleofantastical trends (the Paleo diet and barefoot running) with contemporary invocations (the "Liver King" and the manosphere he represents), I trace the caveman chronotope as its masculinity transitions from an implicit, unacknowledged quality to an explicitly touted one. I consider the various characteristics that have become rhematized into an overarching "masculine prehistoric" essence, allowing the caveman chronotope to serve as a utopian solution to the problems of modernity. More generally, I suggest that the conceptual invisibility of women in certain chronotopes both shapes and is shaped by the ways that we take up those chronotopes in narratives of (d)evolution.

I gathered my data for this article not through directed searching but by existing in the US media ecosystem for two decades; as pieces of media circulated through mainstream media and arrived at my virtual doorstep, I made note of them. The examples I provide are therefore not exhaustive, nor are they necessarily representative of the many discourses that are inevitably present at any point in time. Rather, they are evidence of one particular discursive strand that was and is popular enough to circulate in mainstream media. My claim is not that this is the *only* or even the *dominant* discourse about the ancient past, but that it is *a* discourse that has gained a fair amount of traction in the United States, and that the legibility of its internal logic reveals something about shifting US attitudes toward gender, health, and politics.

In the argument that follows, I begin by providing an overview of early-2000s paleofantasy in popular media, showing that these trends were not just male-dominated but inherently masculinized, and that their appeal was the product of more general anxieties about technology and masculinity. I then explore the implicit masculinity of the caveman chronotope, drawing on a variety of popular culture representations of the Stone Age as I unpack the many indexically linked oppositions that laminate the "past vs. present" opposition with "masculine vs. feminine." Finally, I look to the present day paleofantasies of the "manosphere," arguing that they represent a distillation of the caveman chronotope's masculinity and its elaboration into other masculine domains.

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Paleofantasy 1.0: better living through primitivity

The rise and fall of mankind

I first became interested in the caveman chronotope in the late aughts, when two paleofantastical health trends caught my eye. The first was the Paleo diet, sometimes also called the "caveman diet," whose popularity was kicked off by the 2002 publication of Loren Cordain's *The Paleo Diet: Lose Weight and Get Healthy by Eating the Foods You Were Designed to Eat.* The second was barefoot running, popularized by Christopher McDougall's bestselling (2009) book *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen*. I found it interesting that both of these trends were premised on rejecting technology at precisely a time when rapid technological advances were transforming everyday life; I also found it interesting that their rise coincided with what seemed to me to be a crescendo of anxious masculinity in popular media (see e.g., Green and Van Oort 2013).

The Paleo diet and barefoot running rely on a narrative of decline, suggesting that *Homo sapiens* reached its apotheosis in the pre-agricultural world, and that we now suffer from a mismatch between what our bodies need and what our environment provides. They argue that evolution has not kept up with the rapid lifestyle changes of the past ten thousand years, and the result is physical deterioration: obesity, heart disease, cancer, depression, and a laundry list of other ailments.

One of the reasons these trends became so popular was that they tapped into and stoked existing concerns about the "de-evolving" effects of civilization. A common play on the standard "evolution of man" diagram—featuring a sequence of side-profile hominids, growing increasingly erect and humanlike—adds a final image: modern man, hunched over a computer or a cell phone.[1] Drawing on and reinscribing the association between physical uprightness and moral rightness, these illustrations suggest that millions of years of improvement have been undone in only a few decades. Pixar's 2008 *WALL-E* goes a step further and projects this pattern into the distant future, envisioning a 29th-century dystopia in which humans live in space after having covered the Earth in garbage. These future humans are fully disconnected from the world around them, literally floating through life enveloped in cocoon chairs with video screens suspended in front of their faces. They have become amorphous fat blobs, unable to walk because their bones have atrophied from lack of use. Unlike the many dystopian futures characterized by scarcity, *WALL-E* suggests that it is *excess*—excess food, excess waste, excess leisure, excess technology—that will be our downfall.

Technological innovations have often been met with anxieties that they will cause the downfall of liberal society if not humankind altogether. It seems that the rapid technological progress of the 20th-century *fin-de-siècle* provided fertile ground for these anxieties to peak, leading to a wave of trends that purported to reject the trappings of modernity for our own good.

[1] See https://www.uv.es/jgpausas/he.htm for a large collection of such comics, as well as others playing on the "evolution of man" image.

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Man out of place

The logic behind the Paleo diet is simple (though contested by many scientists, e.g., Zuk 2013): human progress, beginning with the agricultural revolution, has caused a steadily growing disjuncture between what we're meant to eat and what we actually eat. The Paleo diet emphasizes lean meats and fresh vegetables and fruits, and proscribes not only processed foods but also legumes, cereals, dairy products, and starchy vegetables, which diet proponents argue were not consumed in significant amounts by prehistoric hunter-gatherers. Michael Pollan (2008, 148) may have advised readers to not "eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food," but Paleo practitioners go back much farther, suggesting that instead of our great-grandmothers we should look to Mitochondrial Eve.

Advocates of the Paleo diet construct a narrative in which a prehistoric past, characterized by health and happiness, contrasts with a modern day characterized by mental and physical illness. Humans who evolved or were designed to thrive in the former are now suffering in the latter. In *The Paleo Manifesto*, John Durant (2014, 5) argues that "there is a mismatch between our genes and the lives that we lead today." Similarly, the author of *Primal Fat Burner: Live Longer, Slow Aging, Super-Power Your Brain, and Save Your Life with a High-Fat, Low-Carb Paleo Diet* bemoans "the ways we have diverged from our primal design and our original environment" (Gedgaudas 2017, 31-32). According to Paleo diet proponents, we should eat the way we did when our bodies evolved, which was sometime during the Paleolithic era. The Paleo diet is what we "were designed to eat" (Cordain 2002, cover) and will allow us to "reclaim our primal birthright, because in nature, any time you go against your blueprint, some manner of disturbance and eventually chaos are sure to follow" (Gedgaudas 2017, 32). In their invocations of "blueprints," "birthrights," and "designs," these discussions verge on religious teleology—a connection Durant (2014, 56) explicitly makes when he suggests that Christian cosmology itself stems from a deep cultural memory of pre-agricultural life: "Life was good. We ate something we shouldn't have. Now life is bad."

At the same time that the Paleo diet was entering the public consciousness, so was barefoot running—in fact, a mere ten months after profiling New York City's "new age cavemen" (Goldstein 2010), *The New York Times* profiled a group of barefoot runners (Thomas 2010). Barefoot running is premised on the idea that cushioned running shoes actually make running worse: they alter our stride, promoting a heel-first gait that is inefficient and damages our joints; they weaken foot muscles, further throwing off our body mechanics; and they insulate feet from sensory input, rendering us unable to adapt to uneven terrain. Running barefoot—or running in expensive "barefoot" shoes that provide no support or cushioning but serve as a barrier between your feet and the disgusting city sidewalk—is supposedly safer, more ergonomic, and more enjoyable.

Christopher McDougall is generally credited with making barefoot running mainstream, with his bestselling (McDougall 2009) non-fiction book *Born to Run*. The book tells the story of the Tarahumara, an indigenous Mexican group that engages in feats of "superhuman" endurance, running 50+ miles at a time over harsh terrain wearing flimsy sandals made from old car tires. After years of struggling to be a successful runner, McDougall hears of the Tarahumara and decides that he must go to Mexico

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to see them for himself; he is astonished by the "Natural Born Runners" that he discovers. He befriends a running guru, a mysterious American expat by the name of "Caballo Blanco," who teaches him how to run properly and, with McDougall's help, organizes a race to end all races: the greatest Tarahumara ultrarunners racing against the greatest American ultrarunners on a 50-mile course in the heart of Chihuahua. (The Tarahumara, naturally, win.)

In the book, McDougall does not advocate actually running barefoot; the only truly barefoot runner in the book is one of the great disciples of the tradition, the American "Barefoot Ted," whom McDougall regards (fondly) as an eccentric uncle type. But McDougall delves deeply into the ostensible science behind barefoot running and comes out clearly in favor of minimalist shoes and an altered gait, and by the time *The New York Times*'s "Well" blog profiles him he has gone entirely shoe-free (Fidelman 2009).

In the years surrounding 2010, the Paleo diet and barefoot running were major health trends; the *New York Times* bestseller list included multiple Paleo diet books and cookbooks, and the market saw an explosion of minimalist running shoes, including the infamous Vibram FiveFingers with distinctive separated toes. Even as late as 2018, a post on the *New York Times*'s "Well" blog begins with "It seems these days that every third person I meet is either already on the 'Paleo' diet or planning to try it" (Brody 2018). But these trends were especially popular with a particular subset of the population: men.

Implicit masculinity in the Paleo diet and barefoot running

Although diet and fitness trends stereotypically target women, these paleofantasy-based health trends are distinctively male-dominated. Prominent Paleo diet leaders—Loren Cordain, Walter Voegtlin (the original founder of the diet), Arthur De Vany, and Erwan Le Corre—were all men. Adherents are more diverse, but only slightly; the *New York Times* profile of New York City's "new age cavemen" noted that there was a "lone woman" amongst all of the men, and asserts that "there is an indisputable macho component to the lifestyle" (Goldstein 2010, ST1). Barefoot running is similarly skewed male: men's minimalist shoes tend to have many more online reviews than women's, and on a 2024 post on the Barefoot Runners Society's Facebook page that announced the society's closure, the gender breakdown of the farewell comments (judging by names and profile pictures) was 19% women (8 comments) and 81% men (35 comments).

This demographic skew towards men goes hand-in-hand with the language used by advocates of the trends; while they do not explicitly limit themselves to male audiences, the seminal texts of these paleofantasy movements employ registers that are conventionally linked to masculinity. One is the register of scientific expertise (Milam and Nye 2015), which Tebaldi and Burnett (2025) have also noted is common among male alt-right health influencers. Paleofantasy authors cite fossil records and medical studies, orienting themselves toward "hard evidence" (and implying that those who disagree are illogical or ignoring facts). On the covers of Paleo diet books, author names are followed by long strings of esoteric acronyms indicating professional and scholarly certifications: MS, RD, CDN, CNS (Blum 2013); CNS, NTP, BCHN (Gedgaudas

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2017). Cordain's (2002) volume on the Paleo diet is full of scientific jargon, weighing the merits of alkaline loads, leptins, and long-chain omega 3 fatty acids.

If authors do not themselves have advanced science degrees, they recount their interactions with professors at prestigious institutions. In *The Paleo Manifesto*, Durant (2013) discusses his time as an undergraduate studying evolutionary psychology under Steven Pinker, and then meets with a variety of PhDs, always referred to in text as "Dr. [Last name]." McDougall (2009) similarly quotes dozens of people with "Dr." or "PhD" appended to their names who are the heads of various labs and clinics, and devotes a chapter to his interactions with Dennis Bramble, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Utah, and Daniel Lieberman, a Harvard paleoanthropologist. (This continual emphasis on the academic credentials of sources is not an inevitable byproduct of science writing; consider, for example, popular science writer Mary Roach, who refers to scientists using their bare last name.)

McDougall himself does not make use of the hyperscientific register, but *Born to Run* is written in a different distinctly masculine voice. Using colloquial words like "badass" and "younguns" and making jokes about bodily fluids, McDougall would not be out of place among the fraternity brothers that Scott Kiesling (2001, 2004) studied. His writing, flitting between firsthand descriptions of his own observations, free indirect discourse, and third-person omniscient narration recounting of the experiences that others have in his absence, was clearly influenced by gonzo journalists like Hunter S. Thompson and Truman Capote.

Femininity is not completely absent from the field. There are, as always, attempts to use these new trends to capitalize on women's insecurities—such as Esther Blum's (2013) "Paleo chic diet" book *Cavewomen Don't Get Fat*, whose title is a play on the more famous *French Women Don't Get Fat*—but they are rare and self-consciously diverging from a masculine default. Blum's book (which has only 210 reviews on Goodreads, compared to more than 4600 for Cordain's book) is careful to explicitly distance itself from the default masculinity of the domain; the bookjacket reassures the reader that "the Paleo Diet isn't just for hard-core Cross-Fitters and meat-loving men."

Why do these trends appeal primarily to men, as leaders and adherents? I suggest that it is because the narratives these trends are based on are implicitly *about* men, even though they purport to be about humankind more generally. Consider *Born to Run*; early on, McDougall takes care to point out that the Tarahumara are very egalitarian, and that both men and women are preternaturally strong runners. Yet this is the only mention of Tarahumara women in the entire book; the rest of the book is filled with references to "the Tarahumara" that are actually only references to Tarahumara men. For example, McDougall (2009, 73) bemoans the fact that newspapers were claiming that "the Tarahumara consider it shameful to lose to a woman," a phrasing that treats "the Tarahumara" as implicitly male. (Compare to "the Tarahumara consider it shameful for a man to lose to a woman.")

Discourses about the Paleo diet and barefoot running, I argue, draw on a broader "caveman chronotope" in which masculinity is not just unmarked but universal. In the next section, I draw out this perceived masculinity and consider its implications for how invoking the past can be used to critique the present.

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The caveman chronotope: paleofantasy's noble savage

Invisible (cave)women

Though Paleolithic women surely existed in equal numbers to Paleolithic men, there is a tendency to elide them from representations of the period. Cavewomen are not entirely absent, but they are decidedly marked, appearing only when their femininity is explicitly relevant. Earlier popular culture representations of the Paleolithic era tended to treat it as a new stage for rehashing modern-day gender dynamics; consider the campy *One Million Years B.C.* (1966), in which a scantily clad Raquel Welch battles stop-motion animated dinosaurs, or the classic sitcom family of *The Flintstones* (1960–66), in which Fred and Wilma faced all of the same challenges as an idealized post-WWII nuclear family. Decades later, comic strips like The Far Side (1979–1995) and Bizarro (1985–present) would occasionally bring in a cavewoman when she was needed for some standard battle-of-the-sexes humor (such as a cavewoman complaining to her husband that their neighbors have a nicer cave).

When comedy about gender dynamics began to wear thin, representations of cavewomen all but disappeared; the clash between prehistoric man and modern man, rather than the clash between men and women, became the primary source of humor. For example, GEICO's famous "caveman" commercials of the mid-aughts featured only men. The ads played on "sensitivity culture," showing cavemen being offended by the tagline "So easy, a caveman could do it!" and drawing humor from the unexpected juxtaposition of hairy, prominent-browed cavemen engaging in upper-class activities like eating at fancy restaurants and playing tennis. The campaign was spun off into a short-lived sitcom, *Cavemen* (2007), which posited a world in which cavemen—now labeled "Neanderthals"—continued to exist alongside *Homo sapiens* into the modern world, facing discrimination that was only a slightly veiled allegory for racism. Yet the Neanderthal women who would be necessary for this propagation were conspicuously absent from the show.

Even academic discourses about prehistoric humans have a tendency to elide the existence of prehistoric women (see e.g., Moser 1998). Consider the classic "evolution of man" diagram, which previous scholarship (e.g., Diogo et al. 2023) has noted rarely features female hominids. When I first began researching this topic in 2011, I could barely find any examples with females; now, there are many more available, although they are still the exception rather than the norm, as a Google Image search for "human evolution" can attest. The result of this erasure is the impression that female hominids did not even exist—that modern-day women appeared fully formed at the end of the process. One educational poster literally depicts this, showing only male figures for all but the final stage of evolutionary development, at which point a female *Homo sapiens* appears alongside her male counterpart.[2]

Lovejoy and Boas, in their (1935) critique of the very primitivism that undergirds paleofantasy, use a turn of phrase that implicitly erases women from humanity's evolutionary past:

[2]https://www.eurographics.ca/en/products/details/2450-0339

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> It is a not improbable conjecture that the feeling that humanity was becoming over-civilized, that life was getting too complicated and over-refined, dates from the time when the cave-man first became such. It can hardly be supposed—if the cave-men were at all like their descendants—that none among them discoursed with contempt upon the cowardly **effeminacy** of living under shelter or upon the exasperating inconvenience of constantly returning for food and sleep to the same place instead of being free to roam at large in the wide-open spaces." (Lovejoy and Boas 1935, 7, emphasis mine)

The use of "effeminacy" here is fascinating. We can see how, even in 1935, the groundwork of contemporary paleofantasy was already laid. Not only is the comfort brought by technological advancement equated to femininity and derided as such, but "humanity" in the form of "cave-men" is also treated as presumptively male, because it is generally not considered a problem when women are effeminate.

It is not news, of course, that the unmarked, generic human is male; Simone de Beauvoir (1949) made this argument in *The Second Sex*, and Carmen Criado Perez's (2019) *Invisible Women* provides an extremely thorough overview of the ways in which, 70 years later, de Beauvoir's argument still holds. Thus it is not surprising that the word "(cave)man," while purportedly gender-neutral, is usually interpreted as referring to men-not-women. What I am interested in here is the effects of this erasure, and particularly its relationship to a narrative in which modernization equals feminization.

The caveman chronotope, in other words, is imbued with what appears to be a natural masculinity, which both draws on and produces the invisibility of women in the chronotope. The process of civilization is thus conceived of as a process of *feminization*, whereby technological advances have transformed humanity from robust, burly men to weak, sickly androgynes.

Narrating feminization

Popular caveman narratives of the 2010s reinforce this "modernization = feminization" narrative. *The Croods*, a 2013 Dreamworks animated movie, focuses on a Paleolithic family living a hardscrabble life at the tail end of the caveman chronotope (their world is literally collapsing around them due to volcanic and tectonic activity). There are, perhaps surprisingly, more female characters (four) than male (three), and the protagonist is a young woman (Eep). Like the Flintstones, the Crood family serves as a canvas for modern family dynamics: the overprotective father, the tolerant mother, the crotchety mother-in-law constantly at odds with the family patriarch. But the plot centers around Eep's desire to embrace technology (fire, shoes, not living in a cave) and her conflict with her father's paranoid hatred of change. Patriarchy and conservatism are thus linked to the caveman chronotope, and feminism and progress are linked to advancing beyond it.

While *The Croods* suggests that this feminizing progress is a good thing, a later movie, *Early Man* (2018), falls more in line with the paleofantastical framework. *Early Man* is a British stop-motion animated film that similarly follows the last remaining cavepeople as they fight against the encroaching Bronze age, though in this case the cavepeople are framed as righteous in comparison to their more modern

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counterparts. The battle between ancient and modern culminates in a football (soccer) match between the two groups, which—as in any underdog sports team movie—the cavepeople win due to their can-do spirit and wholesome cooperation.

Early Man is an iteration of the "Snobs vs. Slobs" genre, a genre marked by a battle between "the aloof, self-centered, cultured rich folks" and "the crass loudmouths who, deep down, are smarter and more fundamentally decent" (Vago 2020). At its heart, the genre is about class conflict, and specifically about the clash between working-class and upper-class ideals of masculinity, with working-class masculinity nearly always winning out (for more on the opposition between working-class and upper-class masculinity, see Rotundo 1987; Bordo 1999; Bederman 2008). In *Early Man*, class conflict is transposed into synchronic difference, transforming a battle between social classes into a battle between stages of human civilization.

Despite the "progress is bad" message, *Early Man* is not overtly misogynistic. Though there is a significant gender imbalance (two cavewomen in comparison to eight cavemen), the cavepeople are egalitarian, with no obvious gender differentiation. The women hunt and play football alongside the men (though no one of any gender engages in any stereotypically feminine domestic labor). It is modern society that suffers from sexism; indeed, a Bronze age girl defects to the Paleolithic team because women in her society are not allowed to play football.

Yet if we look beyond the surface narrative, we can see that the undifferentiated masculinity of the cavepeople (men and women alike are able to engage in masculine activities) is portrayed in contrast to an implicitly feminized modern society. The villain, an avaricious bureaucrat from the nearby Bronze age city, is coded as feminine; he has a comical French accent (which Coffey 2025 shows is stereotyped in the UK as effeminate) and is hairless from head to (presumably) toe, shown to have pendulous male breasts in a bathing scene. The other Bronze age residents have an assortment of Continental European accents (Italian, German, Scandinavian), in contrast to the various regional British accents of the cavemen. When Goona, the defected Bronze age girl, gets on the pitch to play for the Stone Age team, the villain objects to there being a "girl" on the field, but does not object to the presence of the cavewomen—reinforcing the sense that the cavewomen are masculinized by their cavewomanness and thus do not count as female.

Thus, while the modern men are emplotted as evil in part because of their sexism, their evilness is also implicitly bolstered by their wealth, aristocracy, and Europeanness—traits that have been well-established as both "feminine" and as "bad" in contemporary Western cinema. The movie does not call attention to these indexes; rather, the movie makes use of already thoroughly enregistered traits to produce a "common sense" contrast between the two groups. The Bronze Agers are evil/feminine/upper-class and the Cavemen are good/masculine/working-class, with no single of those attributes having temporal or logical primacy, because the ideological associations between them are long-standing and widely recognized.

More generally, the masculinity of the caveman chronotope is naturalized through its incorporation of a densely laminated set of oppositions, fusing "caveman" and "modern man" with a variety of attributes that are already thoroughly gendered. In the next section, I consider what, specifically, those attributes are.

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Meat, hair, and dangerous things: rhematizing the caveman chronotope

Rhematization is the process by which a constellation of indexically connected attributes come to be seen as stemming from a single, shared "essence" (Gal and Irvine 2019). The result of rhematization is that context-specific, precarious indexical associations come to be seen as self-evident, natural icons. The caveman chronotope, I argue, has come to be seen as *essentially*, indisputably masculine, thanks to processes of erasure and fractal recursivity that emphasize characteristics seen (by a US audience, at least) as inherently masculine.

First, and most obvious, the caveman chronotope is characterized by *toughness*. Thomas Hobbes (1651, XIII.9) famously described the life of man in the state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The caveman chronotope paints a much rosier image of the state of nature than Hobbes's "war of all against all" (were women included in that war?), but it is nonetheless an example of *hard primitivism*, a perspective articulated by Lovejoy and Boas (1935) that envisions primitive life as one of hardship and scarcity. Paleofantasists believe "that ancient humans could perform physical feats that would awe the gym rats of today" (Goldstein 2010, ST1). Tarahumara runners, McDougall's (2009) modern-day stand-in for our primitive past, are described as a preternaturally fit "empire of enlightened super-beings" with a "superhuman tolerance for pain" (13-4). To state the obvious, toughness is envisioned by contemporary US culture as a highly masculine trait, and thus the "tough" caveman chronotope is masculinized.

Paleofantasists also consistently emphasize the *robustness* of Paleolithic man. Looking at the fossil remains of Skhul V, an early modern human from the Levant, Durant (2014, 47-48) marvels at his massive jaw and a long femur bespeaking a towering stature. Cavemen developed large, powerful jaws from eating hard foods, we are told by Dr. Lieberman, the chair of Harvard's Human Evolutionary Biology department. "And since we all eat such soft foods these days?" Durant asks. "Smaller jaws," Lieberman responds. Later, looking at the remains of a not-as-ancient farmer, Lieberman states, "This is a squat little person who had a horrible, nasty life" (2014, 51). Again, greater size—especially greater height and larger jaws—is strongly associated with masculinity, and thus our larger prehistoric ancestors are implicitly more masculine.

Though prehistoric humans living in different environments may have had vastly different diets, evidence suggests that, for many hunter-gatherer groups, plant matter is/was a greater source of calories than meat (e.g., Kelly 2013; Chen et al. 2024). Yet popular representations of prehistoric man focus entirely on *meat consumption*: comically large drumsticks, massive racks of ribs, enormous raw steaks. The Paleo diet also includes vegetables and fruits, but mainstream media write-ups focus on the meat: the *New York Times* profile of Paleo dieters (Goldstein 2010, ST1) describes one man's diet of "grass-fed ground beef, which he eats raw," and pictures John Durant stocking the massive chest freezer of meat in his small New York City apartment. In both *The Croods* and *Early Man*, hunting is portrayed as the primary form of subsistence, practiced by men and women alike. (The Bronze Age villains in *Early Man* are shown eating salad.) Scholars have shown that meat consumption is deeply entrenched as masculine (Adams 2010; Ruby and Heine 2011; Rozin et al. 2012);

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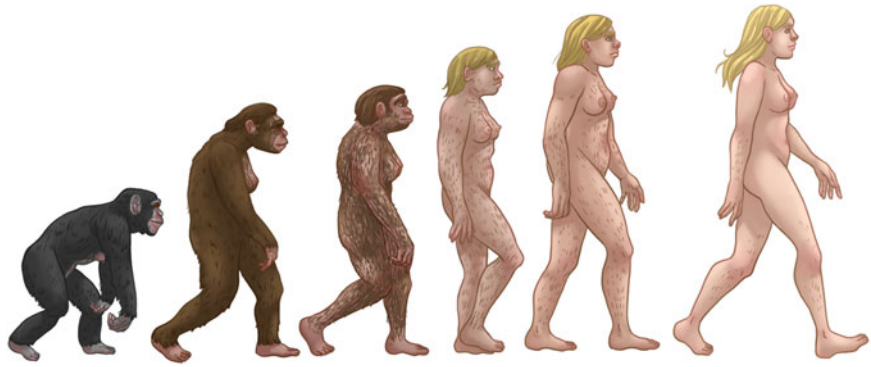


Figure 1. Evolution as "lightening". Source: wikimedia commons https://commons.Wikimedia.Org/wiki/file:female_human_evolution.Png.

therefore it seems only natural that a "manly" chronotope would be characterized by a "manly" diet.

Popular representations of cavemen also emphasize their *hairiness*. Cavemen have long hair, bushy beards, and ample body hair. The GEICO cavemen are shown shirtless with blankets of chest and back hair. More "evolved" characters in *The Croods* and *Early Man* comment on the hairiness of the Paleolithic men. If hominid evolution involved transitioning from ape-like species covered in dark, coarse hair to our present-day comparatively sparser body hair (still covering our bodies, but finer and lighter in most places), then prehistoric man is envisioned as only partway through the transformation, still bestial in this respect. Body hair is also intensely gendered, rhematized as masculine in a society that encourages women to remove any and all hair that is not on their heads.

Finally, the caveman chronotope is characterized by *swarthiness*. The trajectory of human evolution is consistently depicted as a progressive lightening, beginning with dark-skinned apes and culminating in a light-skinned human, as in Figure 1. Scholars have called attention to the racist underpinnings of these representations (Diogo et al. 2023), which historically have been both a product of and a justification for colonialism and chattel slavery. The ideological linkage of whiteness with "civilization" intersects with gender, resulting in the perception of Blackness as inherently masculine (in the violent, animalistic vein), and whiteness as inherently feminine (in the refined, intellectual vein) (Hill Collins 2004; Hooks 2004; Bederman 2008; Bucholtz 2010; Ford 2011). The imagined caveperson may be white thanks to the unmarked status of whiteness, but via fractal recursivity they are *less* white than modern (white) humans, and thus implicitly more masculine.

As we can see, in paleofantastical discourses, the male/female binary is recursively applied to different stages of human evolution. Prehistoric humans are imagined to have characteristics that are both implicitly and explicitly associated with masculinity, in comparison to implicitly feminized modern-day humans (see Table 1 for a list of contrasts). This process relies on various forms of erasure, allowing for a caveman

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Table 1. Rhematized contrast between the masculine caveman chronotope and the feminine modern-day chronotope

Caveman chronotope	Modern-day chronotope
Masculine	Feminine
Robust	Frail/small
Strong	Weak
Swarthy	Fair
Hairy	Hairless
Meat-eating	Vegetable/grain-eating
Violent	Passive
Self-sufficient	Dependent on others

chronotope that is uniformly rough, rugged, violent, and bestial—in short, characterized by a rhematized masculine "essence." This masculinity in turn justifies the desirability of the caveman chronotope in a society where masculinity is valorized and, increasingly, seen as being "under threat."

Paleofantasy 2.0: saying the quiet part loud

What caught my interest a decade and a half ago was the subtle erasure of women from this nebulously defined caveman chronotope, mobilizing a male-centered fitness frenzy. As has happened on many fronts over the past 15 years, this implicit masculinization has metastasized into a very explicitly masculinist movement, embraced by the now-pervasive "manosphere" (see Horta Ribeiro et al. 2021 for an overview). With social media becoming a landscape of algorithmic tunneling and economically incentivized radicalism, influencers are making use of the earlier semiotic framework of paleofantasy to construct more and more extreme forms of both "health" and masculine performance. For example, some "manosphere" influencers (such as Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson), not satisfied with the Paleo diet's inclusion of effeminate vegetables, adopted a "carnivore diet," subsisting only on meat. Accurately replicating the diet of prehistoric man is no longer the goal; rather, the goal is to embody the rhematized *essence* of the robust, meat-eating caveman.

Consider one of the most visible figures in the contemporary paleofantasy movement: Brian Johnson, a.k.a. the "Liver King," who as of February 2025 has approximately 6 million followers on TikTok and 3 million followers on Instagram. Johnson made a name for himself on social media with what he calls his "ancestral lifestyle": brutal exercise regimes, sleeping on a wooden pallet, and eating huge quantities of raw meat, especially liver (hence his *nom de guerre*). Johnson refers to his followers as "Primals" and his website states that his mission "is to put back what the modern world has left out, returning our people back to strength and happiness" (Johnson, n.d.).

The image Johnson presents to the public is precisely the sort of wild masculinity that I argued was the essence of the caveman chronotope: he is perpetually shirtless, showing off his startling musculature; he has a wild beard, long hair, and ample body hair; and he is typically pictured hauling massive weights, interacting with enormous chunks of raw meat, or sitting in a throne with his faithful Dobermann pinschers at his

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feet. According to a profile in *GQ*, he refuses to be seen "engaging in any behavior that could be seen as remotely feminine," such as carrying groceries (Aggeler 2022).

Like his predecessors, Johnson treats "our ancestors" as implicitly male, stating that they "evolved fighting, hunting, protecting, struggling, persevering and eventually winning. And when we win, we get rewarded with a boost of dopamine and androgens" (Johnson n.d.a). Winning fights, it turns out, was not Johnson's only source of androgens; in 2022 it was revealed that he was taking $11,000 of steroids every month. He refused to apologize for lying about his steroid use, engaging in a rare example of metapragmatic paleofantasy: he described apologies as "a pathetic, hollow sentiment just recently invented by the modern world" and claims that "modern-day primitive culture tribes don't have this kind of disgraceful language… If you so much as attempt to utter such 'words,' it's considered a downright insult and you'd be lucky to receive an ancestral backhand to your flippant face" (Johnson n.d.b). Needless to say, there is no ethnographic evidence for this claim, nor does Johnson pretend that there is. Apologies are stereotyped as feminine, thus they must not have existed in the caveman chronotope (nor in the supposed vestiges of the caveman chronotope that still exist today).

Johnson's social media posts are a bricolage of elements evoking the caveman chronotope along with other masculinized indexes. His website refers to "our early ancestors" and "the evolutionary hunter" but also "Barbarians," a comparatively more recent category of the wild other. The symbols used to represent his nine "ancestral tenets" resemble runes, drawing on the Viking chronotope that is also popular with white supremacists (Tebaldi 2023a). He surrounds himself with the trappings of (white) machismo, even when those trappings seem to be at odds with his "ancestral" message: backwards baseball caps, a small army's worth of semiautomatic rifles, the aforementioned Dobermanns, and, of course, a conventionally attractive, fair-skinned wife, Barbara Johnson, a.k.a. the "Liver Queen."

Masculinity, other words, is the central focus of the Liver King's ideology; the paleofantasy is merely in service of it. Earlier paleofantasies like the Paleo diet and barefoot running deployed the caveman chronotope as a self-contained world that we could borrow some elements from. It was a world that "just happened" to be masculine, though that implicit masculinity shaped its appeal. For contemporary paleofantasizers like the Liver King and his followers, the caveman chronotope is an explicitly hypermasculinized utopia, interchangeable and combinable with a variety of other chronotopes that explicitly or implicitly exclude women: Vikings, warfare, entrepreneurship, fraternity life. As with other instantiations of the "manosphere," the erasure of femininity is the stated point—a feature, not a bug.

Conclusion: woman in her place

At the same time that the Paleo diet and barefoot running were gaining traction among primarily male audiences, several "back to basics" beauty regimes were becoming popular among primarily women. "No-(sham)poo" and oil-cleansing methods (for hair and face, respectively) dictate that people should avoid harsh cleansers, because their skin and scalp naturally produce the oils that they need, and stripping them away with harsh cleaning agents will only lead to skin and hair problems. Over the past decade,

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"clean beauty" has become a major segment of the cosmetics market, capitalizing on and stoking anxieties about preservatives and other allegedly harmful "chemicals" (Paton 2023). As Tebaldi's (2023b, this issue) work on tradwives suggests, there are many female-dominated trends that rely on nostalgia for a "simpler" time when things were "natural" and therefore better; social media is replete with anti-vaccination mothers who "unschool" their children and treat illnesses with essential oils, and frame these choices in terms of feminine nurturance. Barbara Johnson, the "Liver Queen," has her own skincare line that primarily consists of beef tallow.

These health and beauty trends tell us to rely on our naturally evolved physiological traits, but they don't mobilize the caveman chronotope. In other words, the stated goal of health paleofantasies—be they barefoot running, the paleo diet, or whatever the Liver King is doing—is to *be like* a paleolithic man. But the goal of these beauty trends is not to *be like* a paleolithic woman. Even if shampoo is bad for our hair and soap is bad for our skin, Paleolithic woman is not imagined as having lustrous locks and a smooth, glowing complexion. Even if carbohydrates make us fat, Paleolithic woman is not imagined as having a perfect hourglass figure. *Cavewomen Don't Get Fat* may describe "our Paleolithic sisters" as lean, strong, and healthy, but within the book, the term "sexy" is reserved only for modern-day adherents of the "Paleo chic" diet.

The caveman chronotope is so thoroughly masculinized that when we *do* imagine prehistoric woman, it is impossible to imagine her as attractive or desirable. Prehistoric man was the embodiment of masculinity, but prehistoric woman was *also* the embodiment of masculinity: large, swarthy, hairy, and carnivorous.

Of course, as I noted in the introduction, gendered ideological frameworks are never totalizing; there are many different ways of understanding the relationship between gender and culture, each compelling and persuasive in a different context. Not everyone will be convinced to adopt a diet or exercise program by presenting it as one's "primal birthright." Not everyone will find the depiction of a womanless, carnivorous past believable or compelling. The caveman chronotope is not omnipresent. Technology is still a masculine domain, and the "mother nature" trope is still invoked in positive ways. But the valorized, masculinized caveman chronotope is an undeniably common specter of modern discourses about health, tying them directly to discourses about gender in ways that shape both.

The ideological linkages that can be made relevant and persuasive in a particular context depend on the participants, their beliefs, and their understandings of the world. The rise of paleofantastical health trends in the early 2000s is likely a part of a broader heightened collective anxiety about the role that technology plays in everyday life, brought on by the rapid technological and economic changes of the Internet Age. These anxieties about modernity had a decidedly gendered flavor, perhaps because an increasingly service-based US economy threatened traditional patriarchal roles, and likely building on the 1990s backlash against the progress of second-wave feminism described by Susan Faludi (1991).

Paleofantasy provides a window into these anxieties, producing a narrative in which the inexorable march of progress is bad, and particularly bad for men, because it is inherently feminizing. The logic projects gender difference diachronically, constructing a just-so story that justifies existing gender ideologies. According to the narratives I have analyzed here, the past was better because it was masculine; the present is bad

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because it is feminine; masculinity is better because it is the natural, robust state of humanity; and femininity is worse because it is artificial and weak.

The caveman chronotope may not be real, but it has become a very real part of how many people understand humanity and their place within it. By paying attention to the implicit gendering of chronotopes, we can gain insight into the complex, subtle ways that gender ideologies are reproduced and become entrenched as self-evident and universal.

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