

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Meeting one of the oldest known species of bees
- » Appreciating the significance of bees and honey in ancient Egypt
- » Discovering a not-so-pleasant use for honey
- » Glimpsing the oldest known beehives
- » Tracing honey's arrival in America
- » Appreciating honey's role in today's culture

Chapter **1**

Dipping into Honey's History and Its Importance Today

The history of honey predates record keeping. But there are clues and documents that validate the significant role this remarkable and treasured food has played since the early days of life on earth. Honey is a celebrated food that has filled entire books. In this chapter I'll share some betcha-didn't-know information about honey's role throughout history. The information is sure to make you a trivia celebrity at your next party.

Introducing *Discoscapa apicula* — the World’s Oldest Bee?

It may not be a catchy name, but *Discoscapa apicula* is the binominal nomenclature, or commonly, the genus and species, of one of the oldest known species of bees. A rare specimen of this bee was preserved in Burmese amber that was found in what is now Myanmar (Southeast Asia). This bee, shown in Figure 1-1, is believed to date from the Cretaceous period, which was about 100 million years ago. To put that timeline in perspective, this bee was buzzing around during the same period that T-Rex was hunting for prey. *Discoscapa apicula* certainly shows some resemblance to the modern honey bee. Pollen grains were found on its legs that showed the bee had recently visited one or more flowers before becoming stuck inside a drop of resin and preserved for millions of years. You’ve got to wonder whether this bee also collected nectar and made honey? Maybe?

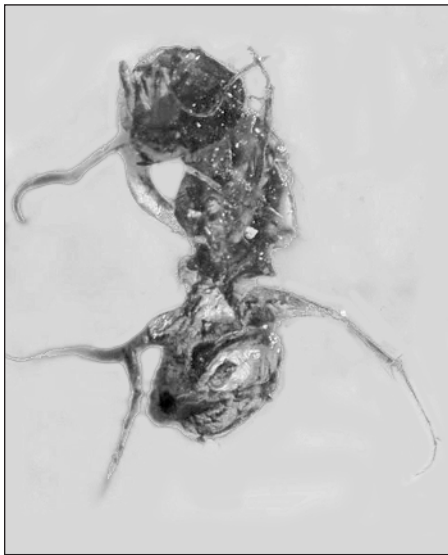


FIGURE 1-1:
This little bee (entombed forever in amber) shared the earth with T-Rex, making it around 100 million years old. It’s the oldest known species of bee.

Courtesy of George Poinar

Eight thousand years ago, long before humans “domesticated” honey bees and became beekeepers, our early ancestors enjoyed the wonderful sweet qualities of the honey that bees made. They would hunt the honey from wild hives. No doubt a dangerous pursuit, climbing tall trees and sheer rock cropping to hunt down the bees and steal the honeycombs from the defensive occupants. In this early cave painting discovered in Biscorp, Spain, circa 6000 BC, we see a figure harvesting wild honey (see Figure 1-2). These early honey hunters found nutrition and energy from eating the wild honey, as well as rich protein from the bee brood.

FIGURE 1-2:
Honey hunter
collecting
nourishment
from a wild
colony of bees.



Illustration by Howland Blackiston

Raising Bees in Ancient Egypt

The honey bee held great religious and spiritual significance in ancient Egypt. It was once thought that honey bees were the tears of the sun god Ra. Bees were regarded as a symbol of royalty and represented the lower Egyptian kingdom. There is no shortage of hieroglyphs documenting the significance of honey bees, the honey they produced, and the beekeepers who attended the hives. See Figure 1-3.

Honey was a treasured commodity for ancient Egyptians. They would float their beehives up and down the Nile following the bloom of the seasonal flowers. When the flowers stopped blooming in one region, the bees were moved further down the Nile to forage on other flowers, eventually traveling the entire length of Egypt. Honey was produced on a very large scale from a variety of floral sources. Surprisingly, the coveted Egyptian cotton is pollinated by honey bees.

The Egyptians loved their honey. It was used as a sweetener in cooking and baking. It was used for paying taxes and preventing infection by being placed on wounds. An ancient Egyptian marriage vow stated, “I take thee as wife . . . and promise to deliver to thee twelve jars of honey each year.” Honey was even presented as tribute to the Egyptians from the countries they conquered.

FIGURE 1-3:
Egyptian
beekeepers tend
to their clay
hives while
helpers smoke
the colonies
to calm the
bees.

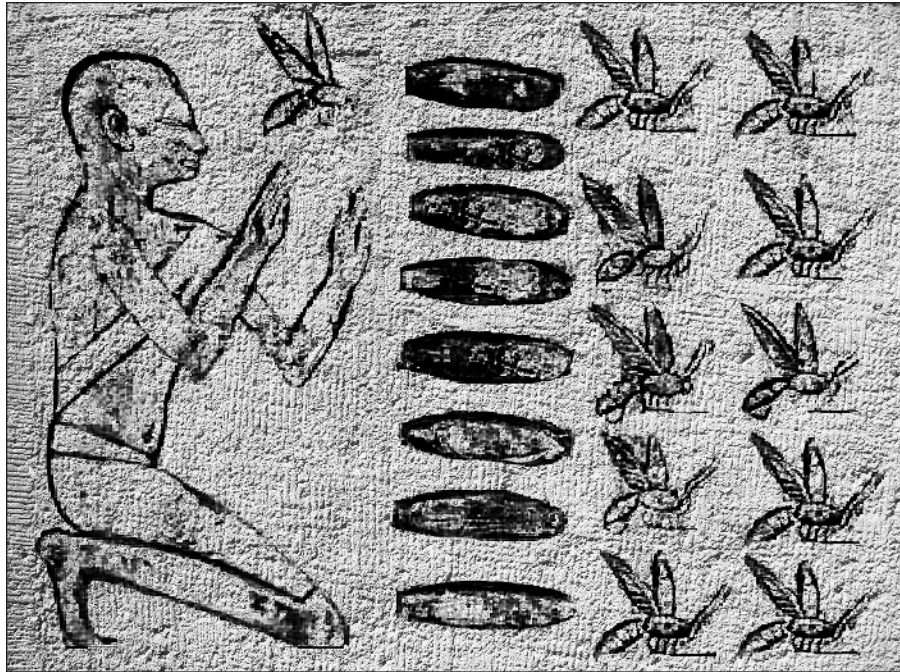


Illustration by Howland Blackiston

Honey was also used for religious purposes. Sacred animals were fed honey. Mummies were often embalmed in honey and propolis, and amphorae of honey were left in tombs, giving the deceased something to eat in the afterlife.

In short, the Egyptians revered honey as a very valued commodity.

As far back as the first dynasty, the Egyptians were known to value the quality and authenticity of their honey. The government assigned the title “Sealer of the Honey” to an esteemed individual who would witness all aspects of the production, insuring the best-quality honey for the Pharaohs and elite. Each vessel of prized honey was marked with an official seal insuring quality control.

Embalming with Honey and More

Spoiler alert. This section gets a little gross and may put you off honey for a while, but it’s interesting to note that due to its high acidity and hygroscopic properties, honey acts by drying out the water necessary for microbes and bacteria to survive. And when combining that with the antiseptic qualities of the hydrogen peroxide produced by honey, you have a pretty effective embalming fluid. In fact, upon his

death, it is said that Alexander the Great's body was preserved in a golden coffin filled with honey and taken back to Macedonia.

Now if that's not gruesome enough, here's a honey of a legend you may want to skip over. Have you ever heard of a mellified body? It is said that *Mellification* was a way for elderly people nearing the end of their lives to donate their body to become medicine that would be ingested by others to alleviate ailments. In short, turning the body into—yuck—a mummified human confection to be consumed for its healing properties. I'll skip over any further details.

Discovering the World's Oldest BeeHives

Archaeologists recently discovered ancient beehives dating back 3,000 years at the site of Tel Rehov in the Jordan valley in northern Israel (see Figure 1-4). This site appears to be the earliest physical evidence of beekeeping, around the time the prophet Elisha lived. Researchers estimate there were at least 180 hives made of clay cylinders, home to more than a million bees (shown in Figure 1-5). Archaeologists identified the remains of honey bees — including workers, drones, pupae, and larvae — inside about 30 clay hives. Each hive could have produced about 11 pounds of honey each year, making it a profitable business effort.

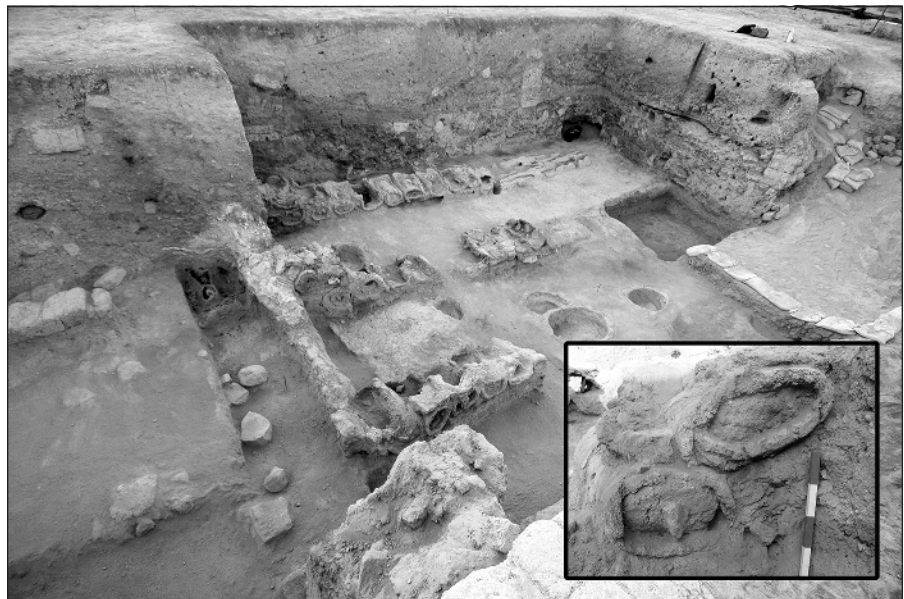
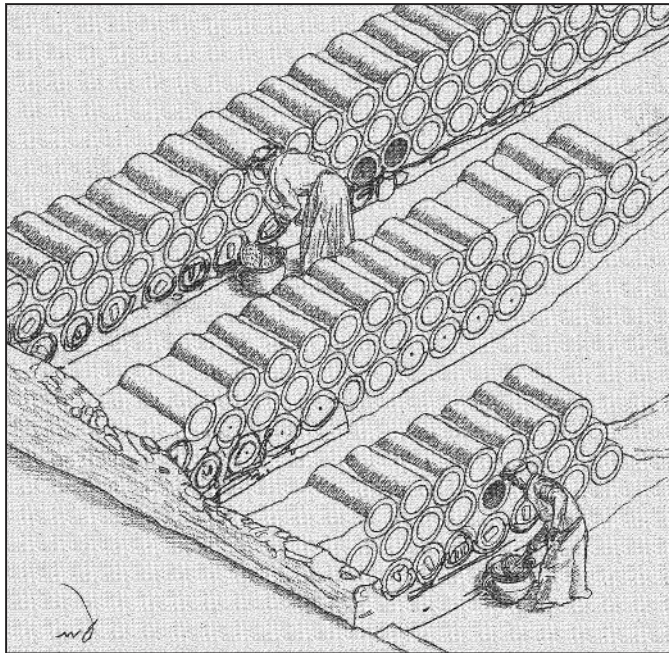


FIGURE 1-4: The discovery of these beehives during the Tel Rehov Expedition suggests that beekeeping was already an elaborate agricultural practice in Israel 3,000 years ago.

Courtesy of Amihai Mazar and Amihai Mazar, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

FIGURE 1-5:
Artist rendering of this 3000-year-old apiary, which was estimated to have included over 180 clay hives.



Drawing by Ana Iamim. Courtesy of Amihai Mazar, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

This is the earliest discovery of beekeeping from ancient times. Each hive had a small hole on one side for the bees to come and go, and on the other side was a lid for the beekeeper to access the honeycomb. The archeologists used carbon dating on grains (of pollen?) that had spilled from a broken storage jar next to the hives to estimate that they were about 3,000 years old.

“The location of such a large apiary in the middle of a dense urban area is puzzling because bees can become defensive, especially during routine beekeeping inspections or honey harvesting,” the researchers wrote. They speculated that maybe the honey was so valuable it was worth placing in such a congested area where it could be watched and kept safe.

In Praise of Honey

Honey is referenced in all the world’s most prominent religions. It always symbolizes richness and great wealth, usually provided through the goodness of God. Honey can be a reward or a gift, or simply a sign of prosperity and a sign of God’s blessing. Following are some examples.

Islam

The religious text of Islam called the Qur'an has an entire chapter titled al-Nahl (the Honey Bee). According to the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, honey is strongly recommended for healing purposes. The Qur'an also promotes honey as a nutritious and healthy food.

Hinduism

Honey is one of the five foods used in Hindu worship. It is widely mentioned as an offering to God. It is described as one of the five sacred elixirs of immortality. The sacred religious texts known as the Vedas mention the use of honey as a great medicinal and health food as the food of the gods. Honey's unique health attributes are common to all the major religions.

Judaism

The Torah describes the land of Israel as “flowing with milk and honey.” In the Jewish tradition, honey is a symbol for Rosh Hashana. At the traditional meal during this New Year holiday, apple slices are dipped in honey (the apples represent life, and honey represents sweetness — grant us a good and sweet new year).

Buddhism

The festival of Madhu Purnima commemorates Buddha's making peace among his disciples by retreating into the wilderness. During this retreat, a monkey brought him honey to eat. On Madhu Purnima, Buddhists remember this act by giving honey to monks.

Christianity

The Bible contains 100 verses that reference honey. In the book of Judges, Samson found a swarm of bees and honey in the carcass of a lion (14:8). The book of Samuel includes, “See how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey” (14:29). Plus, you can find 98 additional honey references!

Sikhism

There is a story of a prominent man who offered honey to the spiritual master, Guru Sahib. The guru refused the honey, stating that when he had needed it most, the man had refused to give it to him. When the man asked the guru for

enlightenment, he pointed toward a poor Sikh who was hungry and had been denied honey by the same man. “Feeding the poor is feeding the guru,” he proclaimed.

Finding Honey in Literature and Folklore

You don’t have to look very hard to find honey referenced in popular culture. Throughout the ages, literature, folklore, mythology, and music have all praised honey in one way or another. The ancient Greeks considered honey sacred in addition to being nutritious. Greek artwork, poetry, and music celebrated honey and the bountiful honey bee.

The great Greek poet Homer referenced honey in several of his poems. The mythological Aristaios (son of Apollo) was a beekeeper, and he taught the Greeks how to maintain hives and harvest honey. For this reason, Aristaios became known as the patron god of beekeeping.

The ancient Romans valued honey, and like the Egyptians, used it to pay taxes. Because honey was rare and precious, it was a food only enjoyed by Romans who could afford it. Honey’s culinary use is well documented in a cookbook by a Roman gourmand named Marcus Gavius Apicius. Thought to be written in the first century AD, his book is commonly referred to as “Apicius.” Be sure to have a look at Chapters 15 and 16. Each contains an ancient Roman honey-inspired recipe. Hail Caesar!

Songs about honey (and honey bees) are plentiful. No big surprise, since “honey” has evolved into a term of endearment. In Chapter 19, I include a playlist of honey music you can groove to.

Hoodoo is an old spiritual practice — a mixture of African, Native American, and European Christian folklore. Honey plays an important role in some of the magic spells practiced by its followers. For example, here’s one you can try at home. To sweeten up someone’s feelings toward you, pour honey into a saucer and place it on a piece of paper containing the intended person’s name. Place a candle (beeswax, I assume) in the saucer and let it burn until it goes out on its own. Now, just sit back and wait for the phone to ring.

And who can forget the adorable Winnie the Pooh? That loveable bear had an unwavering love for “hunny.” And as Pooh said, “A day without a friend is like a pot without a single drop of honey left inside.” Thank you, A. A. Milne.

Honey Bees Come to America

The European honey bee that we see on the flowers in our gardens is not native to the Americas. The first hives of honey bees came to Virginia aboard a ship in the spring of 1622 (see Figure 1-6). The early European settlers made good use of the honey and the beeswax that the colonies produced. The colonists also brought with them specific plants for the bees to pollinate. More bee colonies arrived on ships in the following years, and swarms from these original hives proliferated as feral bee colonies were established. But it was not until 1853 that the honey bees made their way to the west coast. Today, the estimated number of “managed” beehives in America is approaching 3 million colonies. (See Chapter 6 for the top ten honey-producing states in America.)

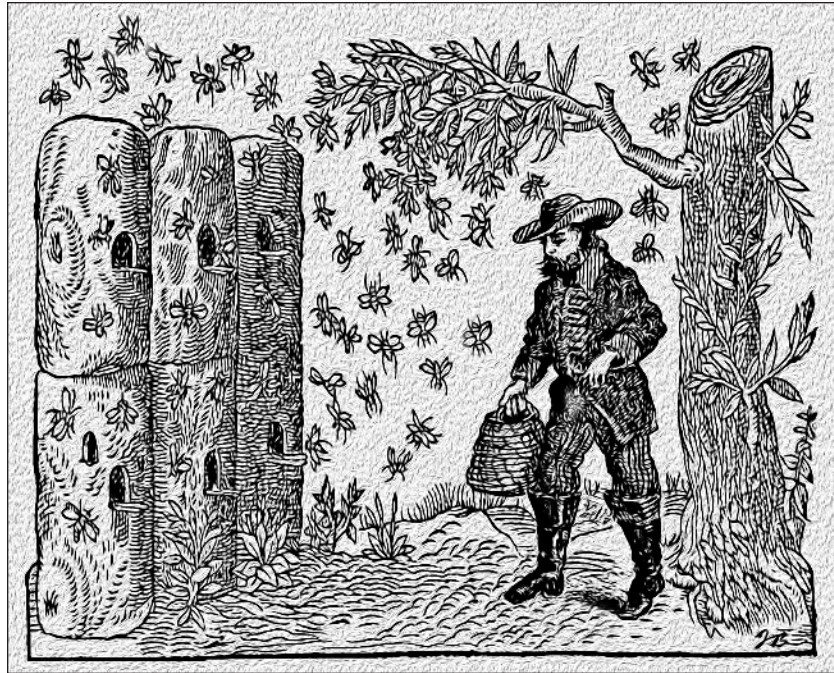


FIGURE 1-6: The honey bee, so familiar in the Americas today, is not native to this part of the world. The first honey bees were brought to Virginia by the early colonists in 1622.

Illustration by Howland Blackiston

Honey Today: Celebrity Status

Have you noticed? Honey seems to be everywhere these days. Honey varietals occupy more and more space on grocery shelves. It's the "all-natural" sweetener found in breakfast cereals and beverages; it's the miraculous ingredient in cosmetics; it's a featured "healing" product in health-food stores; it has found its way into the kitchens of the most elegant and refined restaurants. It's a star on many menus, spotlighted for its healthy and sophisticated taste profiles, distinct varieties, and pairing opportunities. There's no doubt that honey has gained the same "celebrity" status as fine cheeses, olive oils, and rare and expensive balsamic vinegars. Foodies and chefs alike realize that like great wine, honey can also be enjoyed by pairing it with fine foods and by bringing distinct flavors to many recipes.

This entire book is a celebration of honey's newfound celebrity status. In Chapter 7 you can find out about 50 different honey varietals and the foods they go well with. And in Chapters 9 and 10 you can discover how to taste, evaluate, and appreciate the nuances of different honey varietals. In Chapters 14–17 you will find fabulous recipes for making delicious wine from honey, baking with honey, cooking with honey, and even whipping up honey-based beverages and cocktails. To top it all off, Chapter 18 gives guidance in how to pair different honeys with food, and Chapter 19 shares ideas for planning and hosting a party where Honey is your featured guest.

Savor and enjoy!