A History of

Mothers, Infants, and

Natural Selection

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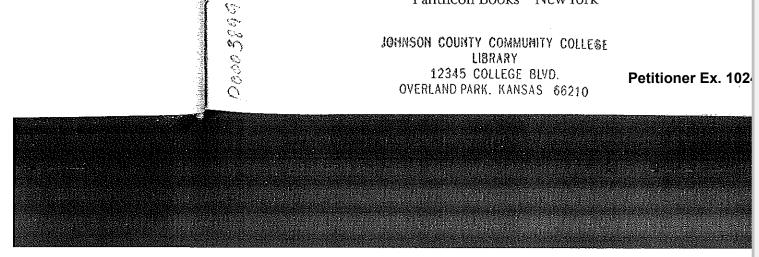
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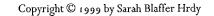
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Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

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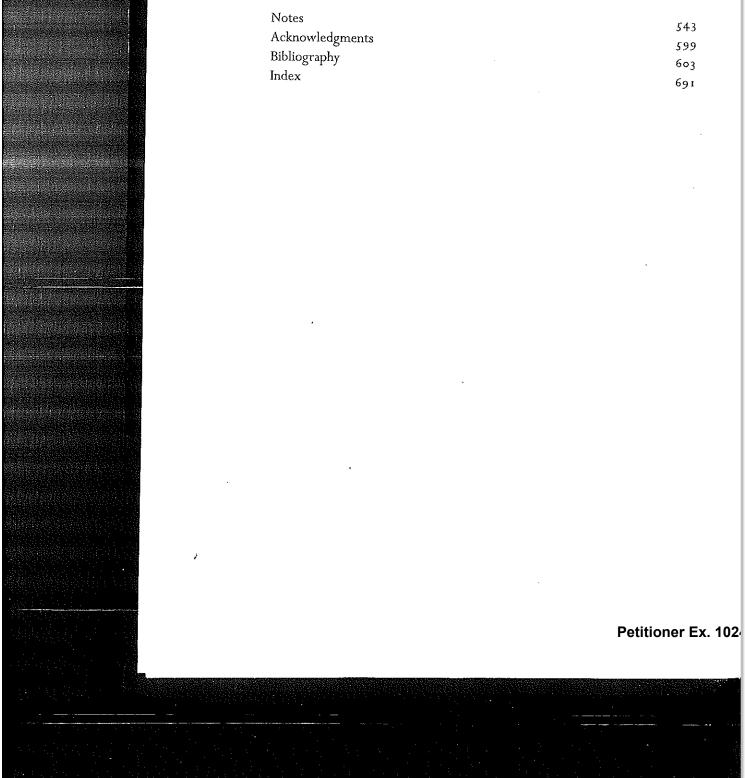
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reason breast-feeding ns of birth control is esponsive to maternal

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depletion makes them rest of Zaire confided here in Africa, among teking wives for sons blump and who reach Monique Borgerhoff most fertile.

were even harsher. The baby of a mother who miscalculated the time to wean probably died.

Some environments were safer than others. Anthropologist Nick Blurton-Jones and others have called attention to the harshness of the climate in a desert locale like the Kalahari, the ease with which a wandering child might become lost in the vast, featureless flatlands; the sheer distances involved. A gathering woman could not but take her infant with her. Yet she also paid dearly when she did.

Women frequently had to travel to distant groves of mongongo trees to collect protein-rich nuts that are a staple food in the !Kung diet. The trip could be daunting, a dehydrating six miles each way. Given small group sizes, even if another woman in her band was lactating, this woman might not be willing to volunteer as a wet nurse, or might have to leave camp herself.

The availability of palatable, alternative foods had to be factored in to age of weaning. Infants born into worlds without safe water or soft, easily digestible foods for weaning had to wait. Instead of Gerber's baby food, babies made do on milk and insect grubs or fibrous vegetables masticated in their mother's mouth, or, like lucky Aché weanlings, sucked on armadillo fat. For a foraging mother to remain in close enough proximity to nurse could require carrying babies—plus supplies and gathered provender—backbreaking distances. Birth of another baby too soon could prove disastrous. Hence Blurton Jones proposed that, in fact, far from limiting population growth, endocrinological feedback loops that spaced babies at long intervals actually worked to ensure that mothers replaced themselves, by optimizing the survival of such infants as they did produce. Babies born at shorter intervals might destabilize a mother's precarious juggling, contributing to her demise and/or their own. When tested against data for the !Kung, the "backload hypothesis" held fairly well. 48

As important as the extensive research on the !Kung has been for fleshing



DOCKET

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