Ivory sculpture in Germany could be world's oldest

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The Venus of Hohle Fels. Foto: H. Jensen. Copyright: Universität Tübingen

(PhysOrg.com) -- The 2008 excavations at Hohle Fels Cave in the Swabian Jura of southwestern Germany recovered a female figurine carved from mammoth ivory from the basal Aurignacian deposit. This figurine, which is the earliest depiction of a human, and one of the oldest known examples of figurative art worldwide, was made at least 35,000 years ago. This discovery radically changes our views of the context and meaning of the earliest Paleolithic art.

Between September 5 and 15, 2008 excavators at Hohle Fels near the town of Schelklingen recovered the six fragments of carved ivory that form the Venus. The importance of the discovery became apparent on

September 9 when an excavator recovered the main piece of the sculpture that represents the majority of the torso. The figurine lay about 3 meters below the current surface of the cave in an area about 20 meters from the cave's entrance. The finds come from a single quarter meter and were recovered from within 8 cm in the vertical dimension. The Venus from Hohle Fels is nearly complete with only the left arm and shoulder missing. The excellent preservation and the close stratigraphic association of the pieces of the figurine indicate that the Venus experienced little disturbance after deposition.

The figurine originates from a red-brown, clayey silt at the base of about one meter of Aurignacian deposits.The Venus lay in pieces next to a number of limestone blocks with dimension of several decimeters. The find density in the area of the Venus is moderately high with much flint knapping debris, worked bone and ivory, bones of horse, reindeer, cave bear, mammoth, ibex, as well as burnt bone.

Radiocarbon dates from this horizon span the entire range from 31,000 - 40,000 years ago. The fact that the venus is overlain by five Aurignacian horizons that contain a dozen stratigraphically intact anthropogenic features with a total thickness of 70 - 120 cm, suggests that figurine is indeed of an age corresponding to the start of the Aurignacian around 40,000 years ago.

Although much ivory working debris has been recovered from the basal Aurignacian deposits at Hohle Fels and the nearby site of Geißenklösterle, this sculpture is the first example of figurative art recovered from the basal Aurignacian in Swabia. The discovery of the Venus of Hohle Fels refutes claims that figurative representations and other symbolic artifacts first appear the later phases of the Swabian Aurignacian.

The Venus shows a range of entirely unique features as well as a number

of characteristics present in later female figurines. The Venus of Hohle Fels lacks a head. Instead an off-centered, but carefully carved ring is located above the broad shoulders of the figurine. This ring, despite being weathered, preserves polish suggesting that the figurine was worn as a pendant. Beneath the shoulders, which are roughly as thick as they are wide, large breasts project forward. The figurine has two short arms with two carefully carved hands with visible fingers resting on the upper part of the stomach below the breasts.

The Venus has a short and squat form with a waist that is slightly narrower than the broad shoulders and wide hips. Multiple deeply incised horizontal lines cover the abdomen from the area below the breast to the pubic triangle. Several of these horizontal lines extend to the back of the figurine and are suggestive of clothing or a wrap of some sort. Microscopic images show that these incisions were created by repeatedly cutting along the same lines with sharp stone tools.

Picture of the excavation. The red arrow shows where the Venus was found. Foto: M. Malina. Copyright: Universität Tübingen

The legs of the Venus are short and pointy. The buttocks and genitals are

depicted in more details. The split between the two halves of the buttocks is deep and continues without interruption to the front of the figurine where the vulva is visible between the open legs. There can be no doubt that the depiction of oversized breast, exentuated buttocks and genetalia result from the deliberate exaggeration of the sexual features of the figurine. In addition to the many carefully depicted anatomical features, the surface of the Venus preserves numerous lines and deliberate markings.

Many of the features, including the emphasis on sexual attributes and lack of emphasis on the head, face and arms and legs, call to mind aspects of the numerous Venus figurines well known from the European Gravettien, which typically date between 22 and 27 ka BP. The careful depiction of the hands is reminiscent of those of Venuses including that of archetypal Venus of Willendorf, which was discovered 100 years earlier in summer of 1908. Despite the far greater age of the Venus of Hohle Fels, many of its attributes occur in various forms throughout the rich tradition of Paleolithic female representations.

The new figurine from Hohle Fels radically changes our view of origins of Paleolithic art. Prior to this discovery, animals and therianthropic imagry dominated the over two dozen figurines from the Swabian Aurignacian. Female imagry was entirely unknown. With this discovery, the notion that three dimensional female imagry developed in the Gravettian can be rejected. Also the interpretations suggesting that strong, aggressive animals or shamanic depictions dominate the Aurignacian art of Swabia, or even Europe as a whole, need to be reconsidered. Although there is a long history of debate over the meaning of Paleolithic Venuses, their clear sexual attributes suggest that they are a direct or indirect expression of fertility. The Venus of Hohle Fels provides an entirely new view of the art from the early Upper Paleolithic and reinforces the arguments that have been made for innovative cultural manifestations accompanying the rise of the Swabian

Aurignacian.

While many researchers, including Nicholas Conard, assume that the Aurignacian artworks were made by early modern humans shortly after their migration into Europe, this assumption can neither be confirmed or refuted based on the available skeletal data from the Swabian caves.

The Venus of Hohle Fels forms a center piece for a major exhibit in Stuttgart, Germany, entitled Ice Age Art and Culture, which will run from September 18, 2009 - January 10, 2010.

More information: The author of the paper: A female figurine from the basal Aurignacian deposits of Hohle Fels Cave in southwestern Germany is Nicholas J. Conard. http://www.nature.com/nature/index.html

Provided by Universitaet Tuebingen

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