

Cambridge scholar makes rare 30,000-year-old find

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Archaeologists have unearthed a pair of tiny bone fragments dating back almost 30,000 years and featuring minute designs carved by some of our earliest European ancestors.

The thumbnail-sized bone fragments are engraved with parallel lines and match similar artefacts uncovered in the same area during the 19th century. They were carved by hunter-gatherers as they slowly made their way north in pursuit of moving populations of mammoth and reindeer 25-30,000 years ago.

The unusual find was made by a Cambridge scholar, Becky Farbstein, who has been working at Predmosti in north Moravia, in the Czech Republic. The excavation team comprises archaeologists from both the University of Cambridge and the Czech Republic.

Experts are, however, still not sure what significance the markings had and are trying to build up a collection to interpret their meaning. So far such finds have been few and far between.

“There has not been much in the way of decorated objects found at this site for a very long time,” Miss Farbstein said. “They are very similar in design to other decorations that were found a century ago. The designs are pretty enigmatic and understanding their meaning is still a problem. But for that reason any addition to the amount of art we have is valuable as it will enable us to piece that meaning together.”

Miss Farbstein spotted the fragments while sorting through a mixture of solid objects left over from a filtration process which the team are using to identify plant remains. Fortunately, she recently began studying this important collection of early decorated forms and recognised their significance.

“Both pieces preserve a regular series of parallel lines engraved on one side of a bone fragment,” she said. “The lines are the same distance from each other on both pieces, suggesting the two fragments might have originally been part of the same decorated object. The character of this decoration is very similar to other engraved designs found in the past at Predmosti and this addition to the corpus of enigmatic decoration from this site is very exciting.”

The joint excavation team, from the Institute of Archaeology at the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and the University of Cambridge, is led by Professors Jiri Svoboda and Martin Jones. Predmosti, on the outskirts of the north Moravian town of Prerov, sits at a gap in the central European mountains, the start of a corridor through which these early hunters gradually migrated on to the North European Plain.

Just over 100 years ago, brickyard workers in Predmosti discovered vast quantities of mammoth bone and tusk. Many of the fragments had been cut, broken and burnt by the human communities who once lived there and a few had been fashioned into human or animal shapes, or incised with these enigmatic designs. Much of the evidence was lost to the brickyards, but the fragments that remain form the focus of both the current dig and an open-air museum sponsored by the City of Prerov to celebrate and present to visitors their world-famous prehistory.

Source: University of Cambridge

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