

First evidence of humans in Britain under microscope

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Archaeologists at the University of Bradford are putting 24 pieces of ancient stone under the microscope to determine how they were used as tools by humans – 700,000 years ago.

This collection of artefacts was discovered in Pakefield, Suffolk, last year by an excavation team led by Palaeontologist Simon Parfitt from the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Since then, they have been exhibited in the Museum of Zoology, Cambridge, and are currently on loan to Bradford for two weeks of specialist analysis.

This examination, being conducted by Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) PhD Researcher Adrian Evans and Dr Randolph Donahue from the University's Division of Archaeological Sciences, aims to prove whether or not these pieces of flint were used as tools by ancient humans.

The stone tools from Pakefield represent the earliest existing evidence of human activity in the UK and Northern Europe (north of the Alps), and predate previously discovered artefacts by 200,000 years.

Adrian explains: “These tools represent a significant discovery in the understanding of the human occupation of Britain and Northern Europe. It's an exciting opportunity to have a chance to study them and to contribute to such an important aspect of prehistoric research.

“We will be examining the stones with our microscopes at 200 times

magnification to see if we can find evidence to suggest they were used as tools for activities such as stripping meat and skins from the carcasses of animals, or sharpening spears for hunting.

“What we’re actually looking for is how the stones might have been modified by humans and by nature in the burial environment after they were discarded. One of the samples has a rounded bulbous end to it, and this was probably used as a hammer. Other pieces have very sharp edges which suggest they too have been modified for use.”

Adrian and Dr Donahue have the stones on loan for two weeks until they must be returned to the Natural History Museum. Until then, the examination work will be carried out in the University’s lithic microwear research laboratory. The findings of their research will be published in 2007.

Source: University of Bradford

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