

Evidence from ancient European graves raises questions about ritual human sacrifice

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A fascinating new paper from the June issue of *Current Anthropology* explores ancient multiple graves and raises the possibility that hunter gatherers in what is now Europe may have practiced ritual human sacrifice. This practice – well-known in large, stratified societies – supports data emerging from different lines of research that the level of social complexity reached in the distant past by groups of hunter gatherers was well beyond that of many more recent small bands of modern foragers.

Due to their number, state of preservation, richness, and variety of associated grave goods, burials from the Upper Paleolithic (26,000-8,000 BC) represent an important source of information on ideological beliefs that may have influenced funerary behavior. In an analysis of the European record, Vincenzo Formicola (University of Pisa, Italy) points to a high frequency of multiple burials, commonly attributed to simultaneous death due to natural disaster or disease.

However, a look at grave composition reveals that some of the multiple burials may have been selective. Not only do the skeletons in these graves vary by sex and age, but the most spectacular sites also include a severely deformed individual with a pathological condition that would have been apparent since birth, for example, dwarfism or congenital bowing of the bones.

These multiple graves are also richly ornamented and in choice locales. For example, the remains of an adolescent dwarf in Romito Cave

(Calabria, Italy) lie next to a female skeleton under an elaborate engraving of a bull. In the Sunghir double burial (Russia), the skeletons of a pre-teen boy and girl are surrounded by ivory objects including about 5,000 beads, each of which may have taken an hour to make.

"These findings point to the possibility that human sacrifices were part of the ritual activity of these populations and provide clues on the complexity and symbolism pervading Upper Paleolithic societies as well as on the perception of "diversity" and its links to magical-religious beliefs," Formicola writes. "These individuals may have been feared, hated, or revered . . . we do not know whether this adolescent received special burial treatment in spite of being a dwarf or precisely because he was a dwarf."

Source: University of Chicago

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