

Cut marks on bone suggest burial rituals of Early Britons

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Evidence of cut marks on a bone fragment from Kent's Cavern.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Research on human remains from Kent's Cavern in Devon has led scientists to believe that humans from the Mesolithic period (after the Ice Age) may have engaged in complex ritualistic burial practices, and possibly cannibalism.

Oxford University researchers examined a fragment of arm bone from Devon's famous prehistoric cave. They conclude that it belonged to a human adult and the seven cut marks it carries were made by a stone tool. The cut marks are significant because they are believed to be consistent with the act of de-fleshing or dismemberment.

Cut marks have been recorded on human remains from the preceding

Upper Palaeolithic period at Gough's Cave, Cheddar Gorge. But this latest find at Kent's Cavern reveals another new element, as the fragment of forearm is also fractured. This was probably done while the bone was still fresh.

The possibility of cannibalism has been considered by some [archaeologists](#) at Gough's Cave, and can be considered at Kent's Cavern as well, although the case for this theory is by no means certain.

The bone was examined and radiocarbon dated by a team from the University of Oxford's School of Archaeology.

Dr Thomas Higham, from the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit, said: 'Our radiocarbon dating is very accurate because the bone was particularly well preserved and shows the bone is just under 9,000 years old. It was found in the black mould layer of Kent's Cavern and is the oldest date yet attained for any specimen from that layer.'

Human remains from the Mesolithic period in Britain are very rare with no other known examples showing cut marks except at Gough's Cave.

Dr Rick Schulting, from the School of Archaeology at Oxford University, said: 'The co-occurrence of both the cut marks on the bone and an apparent fracture, which seems to have occurred around the time of death, makes this find particularly interesting and may shed some light on the circumstances involved. Both are relatively rare in British, and indeed European, prehistory. Perhaps they are evidence of early humans being engaged in cannibalistic rituals, complex and extended burial practices or dismemberment for transportation.

'We can clearly see a series of fine parallel lines on the bone. These cuts may have been made to help the body decompose more quickly and speed up the process of joining the ancestors. Finds like this highlight

the complexity of mortuary practices in the Mesolithic period, many thousands of years before the appearance of farming in the Neolithic period, which is more usually associated with complex funerary behaviour.’

The bone fragment had been kept among animal remains in storerooms at Torquay Museum, where it was noticed by curator Barry Chandler during ongoing research and documentation involving the Kent Cavern collections.

Torquay Museum’s Curator of Collections, Barry Chandler, said: ‘I noticed the ulna fragment in a group of bones from the black mould layer. The cut marks, which are in several groups, were immediately noticeable; but the excellent preservation of the bone made me believe it was probably from the Bronze Age or maybe Neolithic so the 9,000 year old date came as a bit of a shock.’

Early archaeologist and geologist William Pengelly first discovered the bone in 1866 in the black mould layer of the ‘Sloping Chamber’ of the cave. The interpretation of the Kent’s Cavern find is hampered by the age of the excavation and the poor records from this layer of the dig. Other fragments of human [bone](#) have been identified from the same area of the Sloping Chamber and it is hoped more detailed analysis of the rest of the remains will follow.

The research is part of a larger project examining prehistoric violence in a European context, funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

Provided by Oxford Universtiy

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