Next stop France for oldest baby mammoth

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Mammoth Khroma is seen in March 2010 in Yakutsk. Discovered in the permafrost of northern Siberia just last year, this rare example of prehistoric monster is on its way to Paris to be analysed, treated for the germs it's harbouring and eventually placed on display.

Name: Khoma. Looks like: A baby mammoth. Age: somewhere above 50,000 years.

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Mammoths -- slow, woolly and they didn't eat people -- have long had a good press. Just think Manny the caring mammoth in Hollywood's successful "Ice Age" movie franchise.

But this project may open another window on a distant past that is all too unfamiliar, what life was like for creatures of that time and the environment they shared with early humans.

Khoma is the eldest of six baby mammoths found in Siberia over the past 200 years, said Bernard Buigues, a noted French expert on the herbivores who works in close collaboration with Russian authorities.

"It wasn't possible to use carbon 14 to date it, which means it's more than 50,000 years old as carbon-dating isn't effective after that point," he told AFP.

Khoma -- it's unclear whether it's male or female -- died aged just six or seven months. It was discovered by a hunter in July 2009 in melting permafrost on the banks of the river Khroma some 2,000 kilometres (1,300 miles) north of Yakutsk near the Arctic Ocean.

The ice-encased body had been partially eaten by foxes which devoured the trunk and the top of its head.

Initially, a team of Russian scientists examined the animal then informed Buigues, who works with authorities in Moscow for his paleontological project, which is behind Khoma's trip to Europe.

Buigues, 55, is a renowned mammoth specialist who in 1999 unearthed Jarkov, a rare adult woolly mammoth.

Early microbiological analysis have shown Khoma is harbouring very old but potentially lethal germs, most probably anthracis, which can cause anthrax and black lung disease, thus demanding extreme precautions for its transport here and further analysis.

Khoma, still encased in ice, is enclosed in an isolated container and will

be handled initially at a laboratory in Grenoble, which is the only one in the world specialised in gamma ray treatment.

The same technique has been used on other pre-historic and archaeological objects -- "we treated Ramses II's mummy in 1977. It was less than 1,800 years old and was infected with a fungus that was attacking it," Laurent Cortella, the lab's nuclear physician who will treat Khoma, told AFP.

"Our baby, inside its box, will undergo three to four days of a continuous bombardment of 20,000 grays of gamma rays," he said, grays being the unit that measures absorbed dosage.

"The slightest lethargic little germ from time immemorial hasn't the least chance of resisting when you realise that one gamma ray of four grays kills a human.

"We've never handled such an old object or fossil, nor a creature unearthed from the permafrost."

Afterwards, Khoma will be transported to Puy-en-Velay in central France for studies and a general autopsy before going on public display in an exhibition on mammoths and their prehistoric contemporaries.