

Ice Age baby mammoth on display at French museum

July 16 2010, RAFAEL MESQUITA , Associated Press Writer



This photo provided Friday July 16, 2010 by the the Puy en Velay townhall, central France, shows the arrival of Khroma at the Musee Crozatier, kept in a special cryogenic chamber, Thursday, July 15, 2010. The 1.6-meter-high, 80-centimeter-wide prehistoric guest may be the oldest baby mammoth ever discovered and spent tens of thousands of years under the Siberian frost. Khroma, dug out last year from the Yakutia region in Siberia, arrived in France on Sunday, as part of a year of Franco-Russian cross-cultural events. (AP Photo/Henri Vuillet; Puy en Velay townhall)

(AP) -- After tens of thousands of years under the Siberian frost, a baby woolly mammoth is taking a summer vacation in southeast France.

Baby Khroma, one of the oldest intact mammoths ever found, went on display in a French museum Friday - after it underwent special tests to ensure it was no longer bearing the anthrax believed to have killed it.

Khroma is on display at the Musee Crozatier in Puy-en-Velay in a special cryogenic chamber kept at -18 degrees C (-0.40 Fahrenheit).

The 80-centimeter-high, 1.6-meter-long (1-foot-high, 5-foot-long) prehistoric guest may be the oldest baby [mammoth](#) ever discovered. Carbon dating methods failed to determine its age, suggesting it is more than 50,000 years old, said French researchers and Sergei Gorbunov, project coordinator for the Geneva-based International Mammoth Committee. Russian news reports have said it is 32,000 years old.

It will undergo further [isotope analysis](#) in France to try to pin down its age - and its gender, up to now unclear.

"It's a unique discovery," Gorbunov told The Associated Press by telephone. "Any discovery of a new mammoth gives us new scientific information about prehistory."

Similar enthusiasm was felt six months ago in the United States when a 42,000-year-old baby woolly mammoth named Lyuba arrived at the Field Museum in Chicago, where it is still on display. The practically intact specimen, discovered in 2007 in Siberia as well, is the best-preserved of her kind, according to researchers.

For Tom Skwerski, project manager for the Chicago exhibition, Khroma will be an important addition to the specimen pool.

"There is still a lot to learn about woolly mammoths, and the more specimens we find, the closer we get to answering those questions," he told AP. Some aspects of those animals' lives, like migration patterns, still challenge scientists.

Such mammoths offer scientists the opportunity to do analysis that they cannot carry out on skeletons, such as studying stomach contents and fur.

Putting them on display gives a broader public a tangible link to the prehistoric past.

Khroma, dug out last year from the Yakutia region in Siberia, arrived in France on Sunday, as part of a year of Franco-Russian cross-cultural events.

The mammoth was delayed by three weeks after concerns surfaced about the transfer of an animal that might contain lethal bacteria. Russia's chief epidemiologist, Gennady Onishchenko, said the mammoth died of anthrax, according to Russian news reports. Russian scientists carried out further study of the risks involved, and the trip was given the go-ahead, Gorbunov said.

After arriving in France, Khroma went to a special conservation facility in Grenoble, where it underwent gamma ray treatment for eliminating any potentially lethal bacteria. The presence of anthrax could not be totally confirmed from the first studies, but the treatment was used as a precaution, said the museum's paleontologist, Frederic Lacombat.

The laboratory has used the same procedure in the past, when it treated the Ramses II mummy for parasites.

Researchers plan to take the animal in late August to a nearby medical facility for an autopsy and scanning.

The researchers hope to discover valuable information about the mammoth calf in time for the 5th International Conference on Mammoths in Puy-en-Velay in early September.

The exhibit, called "Mammoth and Co.," will also display other attractions, such as life-size replicas of other mammoths discovered previously and the skull of a mammoth found in the Haute-Loire region

of France in 2008.

The exhibit ends Nov. 15, when Khroma will go home to Russia.

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