

Anthropologists discover earliest cemetery in Middle East

February 2 2011



This is the red fox skull from Grave I at 'Uyun al-Hammam in Jordan after conservation and reconstruction. Credit: Lisa Maher et al.

Anthropologists at the University of Toronto and the University of Cambridge have discovered the oldest cemetery in the Middle East at a site in northern Jordan. The cemetery includes graves containing human remains buried alongside those of a red fox, suggesting that the animal was possibly kept as a pet by humans long before dogs ever were.

The 16,500-year-old site at 'Uyun al-Hammam was discovered in 2000 by an expedition led by University of Toronto professor Edward (Ted) Banning and Lisa Maher, an assistant professor of anthropology at U of T and research associate at the University of Cambridge. "Recent [archaeological excavations](#) have uncovered the remains of at least 11

individuals – more than known from all other sites of this kind combined," says Banning, of U of T's Department of [Anthropology](#).

Previous research had identified the earliest cemeteries in the region in a somewhat later period (the Natufian, ca. 15,000-12,000 years ago). These were notable for instances of burials of humans with dogs. One such case involved a woman buried with her hand on a puppy, while another included three humans buried with two dogs along with tortoise shells. However, this new research shows that some of these practices occurred earlier.

Most of the individuals buried at the Jordan site were found with what are known as "grave goods," such as stone tools, a bone spoon, animal parts, and red ochre (an iron mineral). One grave contained the skull and right upper arm bone of a red fox, with red ochre adhered to the skull, along with bones of deer, gazelle and wild cattle. Another nearby grave contained the nearly complete skeleton of a [red fox](#), missing its skull and right upper arm bone, suggesting that portions of a single fox had been moved from one grave to another in prehistoric times.

"What we appear to have found is a case where a fox was killed and buried with its owner," says Maher, who directs excavations at the site. "Later, the grave was reopened for some reason and the human's body was moved. But because the link between the fox and the human had been significant, the fox was moved as well."

The researchers say that it could suggest that foxes were at one time treated in much the same way as dogs, in that there could have been early attempts to tame foxes, but no successful domestication. Studies have shown that foxes can be brought under human control but is not easily done given their skittish and timid nature, which may explain why dogs ultimately achieved "man's best friend" status instead.

"However, it is also noteworthy that the graves contain other animal remains, so we can only take the fox-dog analogy so far," says Banning. "We should remember that some more recent hunter-gatherers consider themselves to have social relationships with a wide range of wild animals, including ones they hunt, and that this sometimes led to prescribed ways to treat the remains of animals, as well as to represent relationships between particular humans and particular animals." Banning says that the "pet" hypothesis is only one among several, which happens to fit with modern preconceptions about human-dog relationships.

Either way, because the same grave that held the fox remains also contained other bones, Banning says that the find holds important clues about burial methods of civilizations past.

"These were unusually dense and diverse concentrations of bones, and indicate very early mortuary practices that involved interring selected animal remains with humans," says Banning. "The site has implications both for our understanding of the development of ideas about death and mortuary practice, and for our understanding of the beginnings of domestication of dog-like animals."

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Anthropologists discover earliest cemetery in Middle East (2011, February 2) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2011-02-anthropologists-earliest-cemetery-middle-east.html>

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