

Neanderthals shape up as globe's first jewellers

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"While reviewing eight, white-tailed eagle talons and an associated phalanx, on the latter I noticed numerous cut marks and a revelation just struck me—they were made by a human hand," Davorka Radovic, a curator at Croatia's Natural History Museum, told AFP.

The revelation came in late 2013 while reviewing the Krapina Neanderthal collection she had just taken over, items from a site once inhabited by the extinct people in what is modern-day Croatia.

"I knew immediately what might be the implication of that finding," said the anthropologist, carefully holding one of the talons that are kept in a small box.

An international study began with the research published earlier this month by the PLOS peer-reviewed international online scientific publication.

The Krapina site, some 50 kilometres (31 miles) north of Zagreb, has yielded the world's richest collection of Neanderthal fossils. The site containing the remains of some 80 individuals, and including the talons, was discovered in 1899 by Croatian palaeontologist Dragutin Gorjanovic-Kramberger.

But it took 115 years to establish that the talons and phalanx at the Zagreb museum were jewellery, and therefore used for a symbolic purpose.

"I simply had a fresh eye," Radovic said modestly of her find that for decades had escaped the numerous scientists visiting to study the rich collection.

She initiated the research conducted along with two Croatian colleagues—Ankica Oros Srsen and Jakov Radovic—as well US

anthropology professor David Frayer from the University of Kansas.



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The four scientists for months carefully reviewed the specimens that had cut marks, polished facets and abrasions suggesting they had been mounted into jewellery.

They could not determine their symbolic value for Neanderthals or how they wore them, as a necklace or a bracelet. But there is evidence they collected the remains of eagles, as in the Krapina talon assemblage they identified at least three individual birds.

World's earliest jewellery

"This is, at least for the time being, the world's earliest jewellery," Radovicic said.

Up until now early jewellery was linked to anatomically modern humans—estimated to be up to 110,000 years old—and consisting of shell beads found at prehistoric sites in Israel.

The researchers also say the Krapina jewellery indicates that contrary to long-held beliefs, Neanderthals possessed the capacity for complex cognitive thinking.

"This is an example of abstract thinking. It proves that Neanderthals possessed a symbolic culture some 80,000 years before the appearance of more modern human forms in Europe," Radovicic emphasised.



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Eagles, with a wingspan of more than two meters (seven feet), were among the most impressive flying predators in the Neanderthal environment, and the mighty birds apparently had special value.

"I believe they were admiring eagles This jewellery is a message. We don't know what it means, but perhaps they wanted to give themselves the characteristics of an eagle," the young woman said.

The new Krapina research may further help reduce prejudice about Neanderthals, seen as clumsy, stupid brutes in popular culture. "When you say to someone that he is a Neanderthal it sounds derogatory," Radovic said.

Neanderthals lived in parts of Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East for up to 250,000 years. The reason they vanished some 40,000 years ago is a matter of debate.



While reviewing eight, white-tailed eagle talons and an associated phalanx, anthropologist Davorka Radovicic, a curator at Croatia's Natural History Museum in Zagreb, realized cut marks showed they were made "by a human hand"

According to some theories, their population dwindled due to extreme cold winters.

Others believe they were outsmarted by the more sophisticated Homo sapiens who moved into Neanderthal territory from what is now Africa.

Eagle talons are rarely found at prehistoric sites in Europe and rarely involve more than one element. Krapina is the only Neanderthal site where eight have been found.

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