

Skeletons found in pit in France offer evidence of Neolithic warfare

December 14 2015, by Bob Yirka



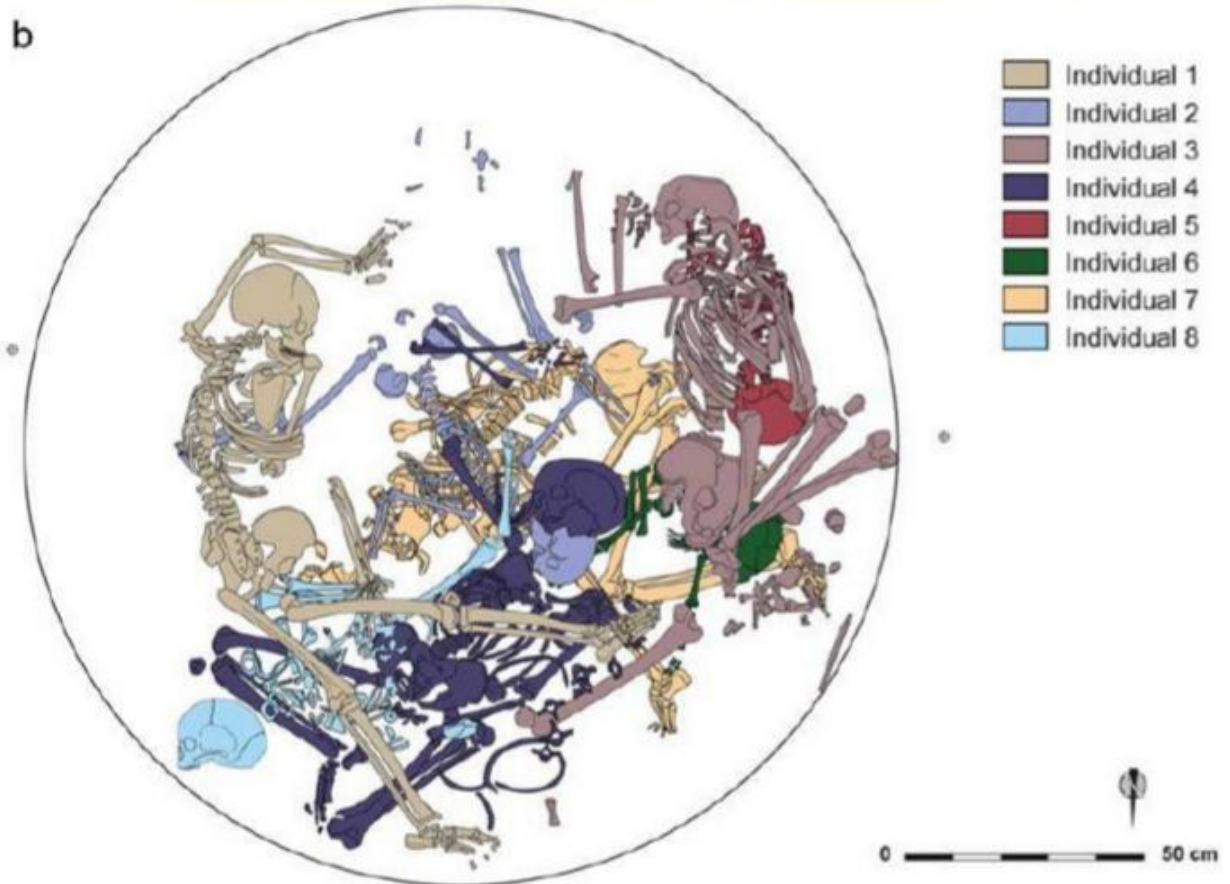
Examples of chop marks on left humeral shafts (scale-bar = 10mm; black bar = 5mm). Credit: *Antiquity* (2015). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2015.180

(Phys.org)—A small team of researchers from several institutions in France, studying 6000 year-old skeletal remains found in a pit in eastern France is reporting that the remains included a bottom layer of just arm

bones and a top layer consisting of the full skeletons of several adults and children. In their paper published in the journal *Antiquity*, the researchers describe the arrangement of the bones and their condition and offer some ideas regarding how the bones likely came to be in the pit.

At the bottom of the 2 meter deep pit, the researchers report, were the scattered pieces and bits of [hand bones](#), along with seven human arms, all from the left side of the body. On top of those were piled the full [skeletal remains](#) of one woman, two men and four children. Just one of the skeletons had an arm missing—one of the males, but it was not yet known if one of the arms underneath was his. The condition of the skeletons, the team suggests, indicates that the bones once belonged to people who were killed in some type of warfare—there was damage that appeared inflicted by axes or other such implements. Testing of the bones indicated they were all from a period between 5,500 and 6,500 years ago, putting them in the Neolithic period. A layer of sediment was on top of the skeletons and on top of that was the [skeleton](#) of another woman, whose body had clearly been put there long after the bones underneath.

The team notes that there was also a piece of jewelry among the skeletons, an arrowhead, a pig jaw [bone](#) and the skeletons of two hares, which the group notes, might have simply fallen in the pit and died because they could not jump out.



General view of pit 157 (a); and plan of the complete or almost complete bodies (b). Credit: *Antiquity* (2015). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2015.180

Such pits were not unusual for the time the researchers point out, what is new is that the bones appear to have belonged to victims of warfare and that there was a collection of severed arms. The researchers suggest the severed arms might have been part of a trophy collection, though they note that it would represent the first evidence of such a practice for the people of that time period. Taken together, the evidence rules out the placement of the [arm bones](#) and skeletal remains as part of a funerary process, they add.

More information: Fanny Chenal et al. A farewell to arms: a deposit of human limbs and bodies at Bergheim, France, c. 4000 BC, *Antiquity* (2015). [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2015.180](#)

Abstract

Between c. 4500 and 3500 BC, the deposition of human remains within circular pits was widespread throughout Central and Western Europe. Attempts at forming explanatory models for this practice have proven difficult due to the highly variable nature of these deposits. Recent excavations at Bergheim in Alsace have revealed a particularly unusual variant of this phenomenon featuring a number of amputated upper limbs. The evidence from this site challenges the simplicity of existing interpretations, and demands a more critical focus on the archaeological evidence for acts of systematic violence during this period.

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