

Human bones may have been engraved as part of a cannibalistic ritual

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Engraved artefacts from Gough's Cave. Credit: Bello et al (2017)

Human bones may have been engraved as part of a cannibalistic ritual during the Paleolithic period, according to a study published August 9,

2017 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Silvia Bello from The Natural History Museum, UK and colleagues.

Human bones bearing cuts and damage are frequently found at Magdalenian (approximately 12 to 17,000 years BP) European sites and one of the most extensive assemblages can be found at Gough's Cave in Somerset, UK. Previous analysis of the [human bones](#) from the site found evidence of human cannibalism, but paleontologists debate about whether some of the marks found on the bones were intentionally engraved or simply the result of butchery.

The authors of the present study examined a right human radius excavated in 1987 at Gough's Cave. The bone had been modified by cut marks, percussion damage and human tooth marks, as well as unusual zig-zagging cuts on one side. To investigate whether these zig-zagging cuts were a result of intentional engraving of the bone, the researchers used macro- and micro-morphometric analysis of the marks and compared them to other artefacts from the same period.

The researchers' analysis reveals that the marks were engraved intentionally, which suggests that these engravings were a purposeful component of a multi-stage cannibalistic ritual. While the researchers can only speculate as to the symbolic significance of the engravings, they suggest that they represent an early and unique example of cannibalistic funerary behavior that has not been previously recognized in the Paleolithic period.

Silvia Bello, Calleva Researcher at the Natural History Museum, says: "The sequence of modifications performed on this [bone](#) suggests that the [engraving](#) was a purposeful component of the cannibalistic practice, rich in symbolic connotations. Although in previous analyses we have been able to suggest that cannibalism at Gough's Cave was practiced as a symbolic ritual, this study provides the strongest evidence for this yet."

More information: Bello SM, Wallduck R, Parfitt SA, Stringer CB (2017) An Upper Palaeolithic engraved human bone associated with ritualistic cannibalism. *PLoS ONE* 12(8): e0182127.

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