

The last Neanderthal necklace

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A falange of imperial eagle with marks of court from Cave Foradada. Credit: Antonio Rodríguez-Hidalgo

Eagle talons are regarded as the first elements used to make jewelry by Neanderthals, a practice that spread around Southern Europe about 120,000 to 40,000 years ago. Now, for the first time, researchers have found evidence of the ornamental uses of eagle talons in the Iberian Peninsula. An article published on the cover of the journal *Science*

Advances talks about the findings from the Foradada Cave in Calafell. The study was led by Antonio Rodríguez-Hidalgo, researcher at the Institute of Evolution in Africa (IDEA) and member of the research team in a project of the Prehistoric Studies and Research Seminar (SERP) of the UB.

The artifact is the most modern piece of its kind found from the Neanderthal period, and the first found in the Iberian Peninsula. This finding widens the temporal and geographical limits that were estimated for these kind of Neanderthal ornaments.

This would be "the last necklace made by the Neanderthals," says Antonio Rodríguez-Hidalgo. "Neanderthals used [eagle talons](#) as symbolic elements, probably as necklace pendants, from the beginnings of the mid Palaeolithic," he says. The piece is composed of bone remains from a Spanish Imperial Eagle (*Aquila Adalberti*) that lived more than 39,000 years ago. The remains correspond to the left leg of a big eagle. Via comparison to remains from other prehistorical sites and ethnographic documentation, the researchers determined that the animal was not killed for consumption, but for symbolic reasons. Eagle talons are the oldest ornamental elements known in Europe, even older than seashells *Homo sapiens* perforated in northern Africa.

The findings correspond to the Châtelperronian culture, typical of the last Neanderthals that lived in Europe, coinciding with the moment when this species came into contact with *Homo sapiens sapiens* from Africa, and expanding through the Middle East.

Juan Ignacio Morales, researcher in the program Juan de la Cierva affiliated at SERP and an author of the article, suggests that this use of eagle talons as ornaments could have been a cultural transmission from the Neanderthals to [modern humans](#), who adopted this practice after reaching Europe.



Idealized reconstruction of Neanderthals and Sapiens, the two human populations that inhabited Cova Foradada, wearing personal ornaments. Credit: Lou-Octavia Mørch



Imperial eagle talons. Credit: Antonio Rodríguez-Hidalgo



Experimental butchering of vulture talons to establish analogies with archaeological cut marks. Credit: Antonio Rodríguez-Hidalgo

Cova Foradada covers the most meridional Châtelperronian culture site in Europe. The discovery involved a change in the map of the territory where the shift from Middle Palaeolithic to Upper Palaeolithic took place 40,000 years ago, and where interaction between Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens sapiens* probably took place.

Studies in Cova Foradada started in 1997. At the moment, the supervision of the excavation is led by Juan Ignacio Morales and Artur Cebrià. The archaeological study of this site is included in a SERP project funded by the Department of Culture of the Catalan Government

and another funded by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, headed by UB professor and SERP director Josep M Fullola.

More information: A. Rodríguez-Hidalgo at IDEA (Instituto de Evolución en África) in Madrid, Spain et al., "The Châtelperronian Neanderthals of Cova Foradada (Calafell, Spain) used imperial eagle phalanges for symbolic purposes," *Science Advances* (2019). DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aax1984 , advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/11/eaax1984

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