

A dead elephant was a feast for the entire neighborhood

June 23 2020, by Merijn Van Nuland



Credit: Benoit Clarys

Former archaeology student Ivo Verheijen made a unique discovery in Schöningen in Germany: the almost complete skeleton of an extinct Eurasian straight-tusked elephant. The remains show that our ancestors enjoyed the odd elephant steak. But they weren't the only ones...

It was sometime in September 2017 when a team of local archaeologists and archaeology students from the University of Tübingen came across a piece of [bone](#) in Schöningen, a village between the cities of Hannover and Leipzig. Things are often found in the former lignite mine there, but this find was of a different order. The bone was exceptionally large and

dense. The students contacted Leiden alumnus Ivo Verheijen, who knows all about Pleistocene mammals. He immediately saw that it was the first cervical vertebra of a Eurasian straight-tusked elephant, which would have roamed Europe some 300,000 years ago.

"From the end of 2017 until now, we systematically went through all the soil layers," says Verheijen. "The other bones emerged one by one, including almost intact tusks of 2.3 meters in length. This meant we could reconstruct an almost entire elephant skeleton, with the exception of the front left leg. We're currently looking for that, and should find it too. Sometimes the foot is torn off and dragged away by predators. Then they leave it lying a few meters away."

Almost complete skeletons of the Eurasian straight-tusked elephant (*Palaeoloxodon antiquus*) are a very rare find. The bones are a fantastic reminder of the powerful beasts that once ranged our continent. An [adult male](#) straight-tusked elephant had a shoulder height of around 4 meters, taller than the double-decker buses that ride round London. It was larger, therefore, than its more famous peer, the woolly mammoth. It was a real giant; what is more, it must have been in regular contact with the [prehistoric humans](#) who lived in what is now Germany.

The next step for Verheijen and his colleagues was to research how the animal lived and died. "As with a human death, an archaeologist first assumes it was of natural causes unless proven otherwise. So far, we've found no traces of cuts or spear marks on the bones. This female elephant must have been around 50 years old, a normal age for a straight-tusked elephant to die."

There is another clue suggesting that the elephant died a natural death rather than being killed by our hungry ancestors. It died at the edge of a lake, one reason why the bones have been so well preserved. "Today's [elephants](#) also go to a watering hole at the end of their life," says

Verheijen. "Then it's easy for them to slake their thirst, and the water will cool them down if they're in pain."



The straight-tusked elephant in happier times. Credit: Leiden University

Case closed? Not completely. Because although the elephant was not killed by humans, there is strong evidence to suggest that the prehistoric Germans wouldn't have said no to a juicy elephant steak. Verheijen and his colleagues found several flint flakes around the skeleton, which indicated that people had sharpened their tools there, something that you would only do if you were butchering the carcass. Two of these

fragments fitted together exactly, which means you can conclude with some certainty that the splinter did not come from elsewhere.

The researchers also discovered two bones with indentations in them. These 'retouchoirs' were used for flint knapping. Under a microscope, the researchers found minuscule flint flakes in the bones. These were on and even in the carcass. The researchers were therefore able to channel Sherlock Holmes and conclude that people of the time would have profited from the deceased giant. Bite marks show that other animals also discovered the carcass.

Verheijen and his colleagues published their find in the journal *Archäologie in Deutschland*. They hope soon to publish in a leading scientific journal too, but a few remaining mysteries first have to be solved. They are particularly curious about the environment in which the elephant lived. Leiden researchers are using mice teeth that have been found to discover more about this.

More information: Jordi Serangeli et al. Elefanten in Schöningen. *Archäologie in Deutschland* 2020 (3): 8-13

Provided by Leiden University

Citation: A dead elephant was a feast for the entire neighborhood (2020, June 23) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-dead-elephant-feast-entire-neighborhood.html>

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