

Age of earliest human burial in Britain pinpointed

October 30 2007



The Red Lady remains are 4,000 years older than previously thought

The oldest known buried remains in Britain are 29,000 years old, archaeologists have found – 4,000 years older than previously thought. The findings show that ceremonial burials were taking place in western Europe much earlier than researchers had believed.

New dating techniques developed by Oxford University and British Museum researchers have pinpointed the age of the ‘Red Lady’ burial site in Wales, previously thought to be 25,000 years old, to 29,000 years old.

The finding suggests that the origins of human burial may be found in

western Europe, and perhaps Britain, rather than elsewhere, although further dating work is required.

The skeleton of the ‘Red Lady,’ actually that of a young male, is housed in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, having been first discovered and excavated in Wales in 1823 by William Buckland, then Professor of Geology at Oxford University. The ‘Red Lady’ owes its name to the red ochre covering the bones.

The burial site lies in Goat’s Hole Cave, Paviland, on the Gower Peninsula in Wales. Ivory ‘wands,’ bracelets, and periwinkle shells were found near the remains when the site was excavated.

The remains and artefacts were previously difficult to date accurately. ‘Many of the bones were treated with preservatives in the 19th century, and some of this contamination is persistent and often difficult to remove,’ says Dr Thomas Higham, Deputy Director of Oxford’s Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit. With Dr Roger Jacobi of the British Museum and colleagues, he developed an improved chemical preparation technique for removing small contaminants from bone collagen, which was applied to a piece of rib and a fragment of collar-bone from the skeleton. This ‘ultrafiltration’ technique allowed more accurate radiocarbon dating.

The discovery sheds new light on human behaviour at the beginning of the Gravettian period of the European Palaeolithic. The new date is the earliest direct date for a human from this time period in this part of the world.

Artefacts found near the burial were also analysed, with varying degrees of success. ‘When we attempted to re-date some of the artefacts from Paviland, we found either no collagen preserved well enough for dating, or ages that were older than before,’ says Dr Higham. ‘One thing we

discovered is that the notion that the site was revisited over several millennia after the burial of the “Red Lady” is no longer supported by radiocarbon evidence.’

The ‘Red Lady’ is part of a small group of elaborate burials dating from the Gravettian period of the Upper Palaeolithic, with some found as far west as Portugal, and as far east as Moscow. Their graves frequently include the bones of dangerous herbivores, ochre, and the decoration of body or clothing with beads, often manufactured from shells. The new dating technique has revealed that the ‘Red Lady’ lived in Britain during interstadial, or warmer conditions, rather than a cold spell as previously thought.

In the mid-20th century scientists dated the remains to about 18,000 years ago, at the height of the Glacial (cold) period, using the then recently-developed radiocarbon method. Later the specimen was re-dated to between 25,000 to 26,000 years. The current research shows that the remains are even older.

Dr Jacobi, Principal Researcher in the Leverhulme Trust–funded Ancient Human Occupation of Britain Project, said the much greater age of the ‘Red Lady’ compared to other burials ‘indicates a much earlier origin for these elaborate inhumations in Western Europe. This raises new questions about the way in which these people spread and lived on the continent.’

The remains of the ‘Red Lady’ are soon to be exhibited at the National Museum Wales, Cardiff, in a new archaeology exhibition, Origins: In search of early Wales, from 8 December.

Source: Oxford University

Citation: Age of earliest human burial in Britain pinpointed (2007, October 30) retrieved 20 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-10-age-earliest-human-burial-britain.html>

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