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BRITAIN & THE CANNIBALS:

DEVON AS WELL AS CHEDDAR GORGE?

by

Ann Wuyts

(08 Aug 2009)

<http://heritage-key.com/blogs/ann/britain-cannibals-devon-well-cheddar-gorge>

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(2012)

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A single human bone found in a cave in Devon may prove that early Britons were cannibals. The arm bone carries seven cut marks made deliberately with a stone tool which are consistent with the act of dismemberment. Scientists believe the bone is evidence that Britons from the Mesolithic period - some 9,000 years ago, between the end of the last Ice Age and the start of farming - engaged in complex burial rituals and possibly cannibalism. They think that because the markings are in the same place, they would have been used to remove muscle from the bone while still "fresh".

Dr Rick Schulting said in an interview with the BBC: "There are intentional cut marks on there, and it seems the bone has been intentionally split. These two together can raise the possibility of cannibalism. The location of the fracture...is where the cut would be made if dismemberment had taken place."

The other possibility is that this is done for quite another reason, the consumption of the individual as part of cannibalism.

The bone (right - see article below) is also fractured and according to scientists this probably happened when it was still fresh, which might provide some support for the cannibalism theory - but Dr Schulting urges caution.



Dr Schulting says the marks could be evidence of a complex burial ritual: "We can clearly see a series of fine parallel lines on the bone. These cuts may have been made to help the body decompose more quickly and speed up the process of joining the ancestors. Finds like this highlight the complexity of mortuary practices in the Mesolithic period, many thousands of years before the appearance of

farming in the Neolithic period, which is more usually associated with complex funerary behaviour." Or, he says, "the other possibility is that this is done for quite another reason, the consumption of the individual as part of cannibalism."

The 'Devon bone' was 'discovered' in the Torquay museum by the curator Barry Chandler where it will be on display on display in the Ancestors exhibition until the 6th of September.

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CHEDDAR MAN & THE CANNIBALS

In Somerset, archaeologists believe they may have also found evidence of cannibalism in Cheddar Gorge.

Evidence of an unsavoury cannibal past was found during the 1980s when 12,500 year-old human bones were unearthed at Gough's Cave, Somerset.

Primitive knives had been used to break open skulls to allow eyeballs and brains to be removed and eaten, while bones had been smashed to remove the marrow. Animal remains butchered in the same way were found nearby, making the Somerset cave Britain's first authenticated cannibal site.

Also discovered at Cheddar Gorge is the 'Cheddar Man', Britain's oldest skeleton. It appears he died a violent death possibly relating to cannibalism. You can go visit him at the London's Natural History Museum (which mentions that the hole in the forehead of the Cheddar Man's 10,000 year-old skull may have been caused by infection and also possibly be the cause of death) or see a replica of his skeleton and skull at Cheddar Gorge.

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THE GUARDIAN
CAVE BONE HINTS AT
PREHISTORIC DEVON CANNIBALS

by

Maev Kennedy

(07 Aug 2009)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/aug/07/cannibals-kents-cavern-bone>

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- Deliberate cut marks found on 9,000-year-old arm bone
- Specimen from Kents Cavern was spotted in museum store



*Cut marks on a 9,000-year-old human arm bone from Kents Cavern.
Photograph: Ian R Cartwright/School of Archaeology/PA*

Deliberate cut marks on a 9,000-year-old human bone excavated in a west country cave more than a century ago suggest that prehistoric Devonians may have been cannibals.

Scientists at Oxford University have examined a fragment of human bone from Kents Cavern, near Torquay in Devon, after a curator spotted it in a mass of animal bone in a museum store. They concluded that it was part of the forearm of a human adult, and that the seven cut marks were deliberately made with a stone tool around the time of death.

The marks suggest that either the flesh was stripped or the body chopped into pieces - perhaps for ritual reasons or to make it more convenient to handle. The arm appears to have been fractured around the time of death.

Evidence suggesting cannibalism has been found at a number of prehistoric British sites, including Cheddar Gorge, and bones apparently split to extract the marrow found at Eton in Berkshire.

However, there are other possible explanations for what happened to the dead deep inside in Kents Cavern millennia before the time archaeologists had believed complex death rituals evolved.

Rick Schulting, of the university's school of archaeology, said: "We can clearly see a series of fine parallel lines on the bone. These cuts may have been made to help the body decompose more quickly and speed up the process of joining the ancestors. Finds like this highlight the complexity of mortuary practices in the mesolithic period, many thousands of years before the appearance of farming in the neolithic period, which is more usually associated with complex funerary behaviour."

The human bone and the cut marks were spotted in the store of Torquay museum by the curator Barry Chandler. The bone was so well preserved he was shocked when radio-carbon dating gave an age of 9,000 years - the oldest human bone identified from the cave.

The cavern, now a tourist attraction, was one of the sites that helped to demolish the biblical account of the origins of man, when 19th-century excavators found evidence of human habitation mixed with the bones of long-extinct animals including woolly mammoth and rhinoceros. Cave bears once lived at the lowest level, and the tunnels and chambers were still used by humans for shelter and storage into Roman times.

The bone is on display in the Ancestors exhibition at Torquay museum.

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/aug/07/cannibals-kents-cavern-bone>

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ANCIENT BRITONS ATE DEAD AND MADE SKULLS INTO CUPS

by

Madeleine Cowley

London

(17 Feb 2011)

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/17/us-science-britain-skulls-idUSTRE71G2JB20110217>

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(2012)

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Pic 1 of 2

*Ancient Britons devoured their dead and created gruesome goblets
from the skulls of their remains, according to new research.
Credit: REUTERS/ Natural History Museum Media Team/Handout*



Pic 2 of 2

*Ancient Britons devoured their dead and created gruesome goblets from the skulls of their remains, according to new research.
Credit: REUTERS/ Natural History Museum Media Team/Handout*

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(Reuters Life!) - Ancient Britons devoured their dead and created gruesome goblets from the skulls of their remains, according to new research published on Wednesday.

Researchers from London's Natural History Museum discovered 15,000-year-old human bones in southern England which showed signs of cannibalism and skulls made into drinking cups.

The skulls -- found in Gough's Cave in the Cheddar Gorge in the south-western English county of Somerset -- had been meticulously cleaned of soft tissue, cut to remove the base and facial bones, and had their rough edges smoothed to create skull-cups or bowls, palaeontologist Silvia Bello wrote in a study in the Public Library of Science journal PLoS ONE.

"All in all it was a very painstaking process given the tools available," Bello said in a statement.

The researchers said the cups may have been used as containers or for some ritualistic purpose.

"It's impossible to know how the skull-cups were used back then, but in recent examples they may hold blood, wine or food during rituals," said Chris Stringer, who helped excavate one of the skull-cups in 1987.

At about 14,700 years old, the skull-cups from Gough's Cave are the oldest directly dated examples in the world, the researchers said.

They said the circumstances behind the deaths of the Cro-Magnons (European early modern humans), whose bones they discovered, can only be guessed at.

They may have been killed, butchered and eaten -- with the skull-cups just the end of this event -- or may have been part of the group who died and were eaten in a crisis situation, with the skull-cups created as a tribute to the dead.

"We simply do not know," they said in a joint emailed response to questions.

The use of skulls as drinking vessels has been well-documented in historical accounts and recent ethnographic studies, the researchers explained in their study.

Ancient Greek historian Herodotus portrayed the Scythians as people who drank from the skulls of their enemies and similar practices have been recorded among Vikings, Australian Aborigines and in tantric Buddhist rituals.

A precise cast of one of the skull-cups, complete with cut marks, will go on display in the Natural History Museum in London from March 1 for three months.

(Editing by Paul Casciato)

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<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/17/us-science-britain-skulls-idUSTRE71G2JB20110217>

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