

Osteological Report on the Human Remains from Slaughter Cave, Wye Valley (Extreme Archaeology 2003)

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Introduction

In **October?** 2003, the Extreme Archaeology team investigated Slaughter Cave in the Wye Valley. Human remains were recovered from a shallow trench dug at Gravity Dig, and from the surface of the streambed between Gravity Dig and Cross Streams. The human bones found at Gravity Dig were from a context that included clay and animal bones, and that appeared to have fallen in from the roof of Gravity Dig chamber. The bones did not appear to have fallen into the chamber recently, as the entire context was covered with a layer of calcium carbonate.

The bones were washed free of most clay at the site. The bones were transported to the University of Bristol, where they were further cleaned and then assessed by Dr Alice Roberts and Dr Jonathan Musgrave.

Methods

The bones were assessed by Dr Roberts (Bristol Osteoarchaeology Research Group). Individual bones were identified and recorded as an inventory; the state of preservation and fragmentation of the bones was also recorded.

Inventory of the Human Remains from Slaughter Cave

The human remains consisted of:

- a long fragment of humeral shaft;
- an almost complete right tibia (consisting of a large fragment of the proximal third, a small fragment of the shaft and another large fragment of the distal two thirds of the bone);
- a long fragment of the shaft of a (possibly immature) radius, with rodent gnaw-marks.

The bones were variably preserved. The humeral shaft and tibial fragments were white and friable but covered with a black and orange layer of calcium carbonate and mould. The radius was hard and blackened throughout, but did not appear to have been burned.

Summary and interpretations

These bones were found in the excavation of the roof collapse at Gravity Dig, and within the stream bed leading from Gravity Dig to Cross Streams, and were therefore unstratified. The state of preservation and covering of calcium carbonate indicated that the bones were archaeological; it would be impossible to obtain a secure radiocarbon date on these bones as they have been contaminated by recent sewage flowing into the cave.

There is no duplication, so it is possible that they belong to the same individual. It may be speculated that these bones entered the cave as the roof collapsed, forming a sinkhole through which either an unfortunate individual fell, or into which a burial collapsed, although ultimately the provenance of these bones will remain a mystery.

References

- Bass WM (1971) *Human Osteology* (2nd edition). The Missouri Archaeological Society.
- Brothwell DR (1981) *Digging Up Bones* (3rd edition). Oxford University Press/British Museum (Natural History), Oxford.
- Mays S (1998). *The Archaeology of Human Bones*. Routledge, London.

