

'Hobbit' species discovered

Discovery of tiny human species on Indonesian island stuns scientific community

By JOSEPH B. VERRENGIA
AP Science Writer

In an astonishing discovery that could rewrite the history of human evolution, scientists say they have found the skeleton of a new human species, a dwarf, marooned for eons in a tropical Lost World while modern man rapidly colonized the rest of the planet.

The finding on a remote Indonesian island has stunned anthropologists like no other in recent memory. It is a fundamentally new creature that bears more of a resemblance to fictional, barefooted hobbits than modern humans.

Yet biologically speaking, it may have been closely related to us and perhaps even shared its caves with our ancestors.

The 3-foot-tall (90-centimeter-tall) adult female skeleton found in a cave is believed 18,000 years old. It smashes the long-cherished scientific belief that our species, *Homo sapiens*, systematically crowded out other upright-walking human cousins beginning 160,000 years ago and that we've had Earth to ourselves for tens of thousands of years.

Instead, it suggests recent evolution was more complex than previously thought.

And it demonstrates that Africa, the acknowledged cradle of humanity, does not hold all the answers to persistent questions of how - and where - we came to be.

"This finding really does rewrite our



Chris Stringer, Head of Human Origins at London's Natural History Museum, holds a cast taken from a skull that is said to be that of a new human species. AP

knowledge of human evolution," said Chris Stringer, who directs human origins studies at the Natural History Museum in London. "And to have them present less than 20,000 years ago is frankly astonishing."

Scientists called the dwarf skeleton "the most extreme" figure to be included in the extended human family. Certainly, she is the shortest.

She is the best example of a trove of fragmented bones that account for as many as seven of these primitive individuals that lived on the equatorial island of Flores, located east of Java and northwest of Australia. The mostly intact female skeleton was found in September 2003.

Scientists have named the extinct species *Homo floresiensis*, or Flores Man, and details appear in Thursday's issue of the journal *Nature*.

The specimens' ages range from 95,000 to 12,000 years old, meaning they lived until the threshold of recorded human history and perhaps crossed paths with the ancestors of today's islanders.

Flores Man was hardly formidable. His grapefruit-sized brain was two-thirds smaller than ours, and closer to the brains of today's chimpanzees and transitional prehuman species in Africa than vanished 2 million years ago.

Yet Flores Man made stone tools, lit fires and organized group hunts for meat. Bones of fish, birds and rodents found near the skeleton were charred, suggesting they were cooked.

All this suggests Flores Man lived communally and communicated effectively, perhaps even verbally.

"It is arguably the most significant discovery concerning our own genus in my lifetime," said anthropologist Bernard Wood of George Washington University, who reviewed the research independently.

Discoveries simply "don't get any better than that," proclaimed Robert Foley and Marta Mirazon Lahr of Cambridge University in a

written analysis.

To others, the species' baffling
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We were not alone

We live in wonderful times. We are privileged to witness the unveiling of what appears to be a previously unknown human species, *Homo floresiensis*. This is nothing less than one of the greatest scientific discoveries of all time. It

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seemed that we had been alone in the world since the demise of the Neanderthals some 30,000 years ago. Now, however, we see that we had additional neighbors after all. It is also now clear that our story is a bit more complicated than we thought.

It is exciting to imagine little *Homo floresiensis* living among Komodo dragons and pygmy elephants in an Indonesian forest. Barely three-feet tall

fully grown, tiny-brained and upright, they seem to have done well for themselves. They made tools, used fire, probably had language, and they survived for at least 80,000 years.

The announcement of the *Homo floresiensis* discovery demonstrates the greatness of science. The find demolishes the widely-held view that modern humans were alone in the *Homo* genus since the Neanderthals. But notice that the world's scientists are not instinctively condemning the discoverers for daring to challenge the status quo. No, they are only interested in checking the data to see if the claims hold up. Science places evidence over clout, truth above tradition. And that is why it is such a great answer-seeking system.

If *Homo floresiensis* survives a gauntlet of intense review—a process that never really ends—then it will keep its seat at the table of humankind and we all will be fortunate to have learned a little bit more about our family.

World news editor Guy Harrison is at guy@cpf.ky



Homo floresiensis. National Geographic.

Fossil human

A newly found fossil called *Homo floresiensis* represent an addition to the family tree of the genus *Homo*.

