After the hunt, ice age man chilled out - with a flute

Luke Harding in Berlin
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He is better known for his hunting skills, but now it appears that ice age man did not merely chase prey - he was also fond of music.

German archaeologists revealed yesterday that they had discovered one of the world's oldest musical instruments, a 35,000-year-old flute carved from the tusk of a now-extinct woolly mammoth.

The flute was dug up in a cave in the Swabian mountains in south-western Germany, and pieced back together again from 31 fragments. Its discovery suggests that ice age man, who roamed across Europe during prehistoric times, had precocious aesthetic talents, and probably discovered music far earlier than previously assumed.

The flute consisted of two different halves, probably glued together with birch resin. The identity of the maker is a mystery; scientists are also unclear about whether the flute's purpose was recreational or religious.

"Ivory was the most beautiful material available back then," Nicholas Conard, an archaeologist at Tübingen University, told Germany's Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper yesterday. "It's a clear clue that music was extremely important."

He added: "The flute is a technical masterpiece. Nothing like this from the Paleolithic era has been found until now."

Archaeologist Friedrich Seeberger, who has reconstructed the instrument, said yesterday he had no doubt the flute was actually used 35,000 years ago. But he admitted that it was not easy to play: it has only three identifiable holes. "Small bone flutes are much easier," he said. "At the moment I'm finding the large ivory mammoth flute rather hard."

The Swabian mountains have yielded rich pickings in recent years, including ivory figurines, ornaments and other musical instruments. Two smaller flutes made from swan bones have also been unearthed in the same site.

Archaeologists believe humans camped in the area in winter and spring. The cave is one of several in the Ach Valley, close to modern-day Stuttgart. The cave complex appears to have been used for thousands of years, and is also littered with the bones of reindeer and bears.

The once-plentiful mammoth was a large elephant-like creature with a hairy coat and long, upcurved tusks. Mammoths flourished during the Pleistocene period from 2m to 11,000 years ago, but then abruptly died out.

The university said it would display the prehistoric flute in a museum in Stuttgart.

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