Ancient Stone Phallus Discovered in Germany

Final Piece of the Stone Sculpture Confirms Its Identity

By CHARLOTTE SECTOR

Jul. 27, 2005 - It might be small and older than old but there's little doubt about what the stone object represents. The not-quite-8-inch polished stone sculpture, found in a cave in southwestern Germany, is clearly a phallus.

A team of archaeologists from the University of Tubingen assembled 13 fractured parts of the 28,000-year-old sculpture, but it wasn't until the final piece was found that they could confirm its identity.

"Five years ago when we started the excavation, we thought it was this but we preferred to wait to find other parts to totally prove it," said Harald Floss, an archaeologist and a member of the Tubingen team.

The smooth, gray stone object was dug out in the entryway of a large cave called Hohle Fels, located near Ulm in southwest Germany, close to the French border. Caves dot the limestone plateau.

Sex Aid or Tool?

Scientists don't know how the smooth, rounded object was used in Paleolithic times (characterized by humans using and making stone tools), but it was definitely used to sharpen flints. The stone has marks along it, according to Floss, who believes that its use as a tool doesn't rule out other purposes.

Tool or not, the art piece is striking for a number of reasons.

First it proves that our ancient ancestors were not the brutish cartoon characters typified in the cartoon strip "B.C." It shows that these people had a private life with friends and family and more importantly they had an aesthetic appreciation, said Floss.

The phallus dates back to when modern humans (Homo sapiens) were walking around in Europe. Although it's impossible to carbon-date stone, scientists believe it's 28,000 years old because of the other items found in the same layer of sediment at Hohle Fels.

Rare Male Art

One thing that's certain is the piece's uniqueness.

"Female representations with clear sexual attributes are very well-documented during this period, but male representations are very rare," said Nicholas Conard, Tubingen team director, describing the elongated polished item with round incisions at the top.

Female bodies and items depicting female genitalia were quite common and often these artful objects also had a utilitarian purpose during the middle upper Paleolithic period. For non-Stone Age connoisseurs, that's
about 40,000 to 10,000 years ago when women provided for their families by gathering food while the men hunted. They also guaranteed the future of the tribe by bearing children, which gave them a prominent role.

Conard hopes that his team will find additional evidence to shed more light on human sexuality at the time. Regardless, creativity has been a characteristic of humankind since its earliest days -- from cave wall paintings in the south of France to ivory figurines of water fowls and horses found in sites dating back 35,000 years ago.

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