

Discovery of Ancient Artifacts Rekindles Debate on 'Hobbits'

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Scientists said yesterday that stone artifacts found with remains of ancient, tiny "Hobbit"-like people on a remote Indonesian island are similar to much older island artifacts, offering new support for the theory that the fossils represent a unique species of archaic human.

The Australian-Indonesian research team said in the journal *Nature* that its analysis "negates claims" by critics that only modern humans could have made such tools, and that the Hobbits, with grapefruit-size brains, were modern humans afflicted with microcephaly, a debilitating genetic condition.

"We don't know who made the earlier tools, but they are the same tools, using the same technology," said Australian National University archaeologist Adam Brumm, lead author of the study. "This doesn't support the idea that modern humans made the tools."

Critics immediately challenged the new research, questioning whether the older artifacts were as old as the Brumm team claimed, and noting that there were no skeletal remains associated with the old tools.

"The artifacts have been moved," said archaeologist James Phillips of the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Field Museum. "There's no continuum. The artifacts are not in direct association with the date."

Debate over the Hobbits began 1 1/2 years ago when discoverers announced they had found the remains of a three-foot-tall woman who had lived on the Indonesian island of Flores 18,000 years ago with several other individuals, who were equally small but clever enough to hunt wild animals with spears and butcher them with stone tools.

The team said the remains represent a new species of archaic human, which they named *Homo floresiensis*, but the fossil quickly acquired the nickname Hobbit, after the tiny heroes of J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy.

Brumm's team argued that "sophisticated" chopping tools, perforators and other artifacts, found in 800,000-year-old deposits about 30 miles away from the Hobbit remains, showed that human ancestors had supposedly "modern" technology long before the advent of modern humans about 100,000 years ago.

Brumm said in a telephone interview that the tools were latecomers in a "very long-standing stone-tool tradition" that had nothing to do with modern humans.

Phillips, however, said that two sets of artifacts so far apart in age do not constitute a sequence. "There's no way on this Earth they are related to each other," he said in a telephone interview. "Where's the evolution? What happened between 800,000 years ago and 18,000 years ago?" Phillips also pointed out that the older Flores artifacts had no accompanying skeletal remains.

Brumm dismissed these objections, saying that the authenticity of the dating for the early artifacts had been previously established, and that the tools matched contemporary tools found in Africa.

Alison Brooks, a George Washington University paleoanthropologist who has not taken sides in the dispute, gave the Brumm team credit for publishing details of the older tool set and disagreed with Phillips's view that the Hobbit tools had to have been made by modern humans.

"They're not sophisticated at all," Brooks said of the Hobbit tools, but like the earlier artifacts, are similar to classic African Oldowan objects made by human ancestors for 2.5 million years.

But she echoed Phillips's misgivings about dating the older artifacts, noting that heavy tropical rains can allow objects to sink into the ground until they reach older layers of sediment.