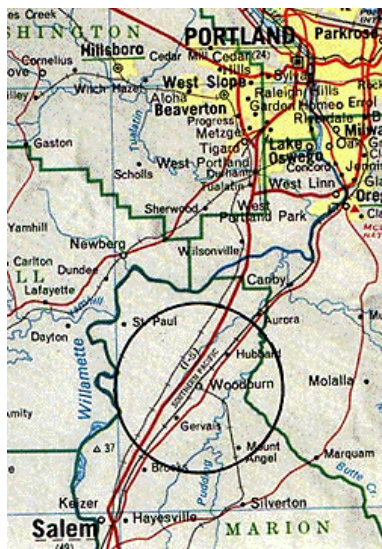




12,000-Year-Old Human Hair DNA Has No Match With Modern Humans

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Woodburn, Oregon Ice Age archaeological site where
10,000 to 12,000-year-old unidentified human hair was found in 1999.

Earthfiles, news category.

October 28, 2001 Woodburn, Oregon - Human hair dating back to the last Ice Age ten to twelve thousand years ago was discovered in 1999 at an archaeological dig in Woodburn, Oregon between Salem and Portland. The Ice Age site is filled with the bones of elephants, sloths, condors and a bird with a 14-foot wingspan. The unidentified human hairs were found perfectly preserved a few feet underground and had enough follicles for DNA analysis. This week I talked with geology professor emeritus, William Orr, at the University of Oregon, about DNA efforts to match the Ice Age hair to any living hominoid species on earth today.

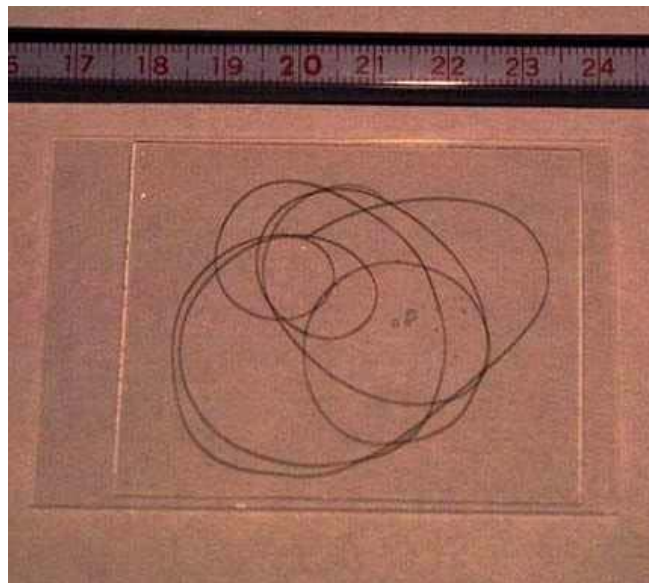


Evacuation units at Woodburn, Oregon Ice Age archaeological site were prepared and excavated.

Some units were skim shoveled and then troweled so that animal limbs and fauna could be extracted without harm. Photograph © 2001 by Alison Stenger, Ph.D.

Interview:

William Orr, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus in Geology, University of Oregon, and Director of the State Museum of Paleontology, Eugene, Oregon: "You can identify human hair, forensic criminologist types, can identify human hair from a single strand because of the granules and color and all that kind of stuff. You can distinguish human hair from all other hair just from a little piece of follicle.



Strand of sixteen-inch-long, dark, human hair retrieved from the Woodburn, Oregon Ice Age archaeological site. DNA analyses of hair follicles found at the site have so far failed to find a match with any known human racial type living on earth today. Photograph © 2001 by Alison Stenger, Ph.D.

We found several strands of human hair, long pieces a foot and a half long, black, long pieces of hair. And then if you can find the root of the hair that still has a follicle, you can do DNA on it. So researchers immediately sent the (Ice Age) hair off to a lab and they began to extract the DNA. Some of it was not so good, but a lot of it was well preserved in the oxygen-poor bogs of Woodburn. The geneticists found the hair didn't match any Asian hair DNA. It didn't match African, European. It didn't match anything. Dogma would be that Ice Age humans along the west coast of the United States would be from a Japanese population that is alleged to have come over the Bering Sea back twelve to thirteen thousand years ago.

So right now we have DNA we can't track. We can't figure out what it's from. Apparently from a population we don't have today. They are gone. And it's only

11,000 or 12,000 years old. About that time period, there was a huge crisis in animals. The larger animals all disappeared and they disappeared in a wave. They disappeared first in British Columbia and then in Washington, Oregon, California and right on down. Some were still around until 10,000 years ago in Tierra del Fuego. So, it was like a wave of extinction at the rate of about 10 miles per year.

THERE IS A MYSTERY ABOUT WHAT KILLED OFF ALL OF THESE MAMMALS IN WAVES TEN OR TWELVE THOUSAND YEARS AGO?

Oh, yes. In fact for my money, it's far more profound than the crisis that killed off the dinosaurs and a few other animals at 66 million years ago. This (western North American) was more sudden, more pervasive. It kind of selectively took the large animals in a short period of time.

HOW DEEP DOWN WERE THE HAIRS FOUND?

The deepest ones were from ten to twelve feet, but a lot of them were from much shallower depths. It's an old stream bed and we just took a little auguring device to core down and began getting well-preserved hair out of the clays. The Woodburn stuff it's like putting it in a deep freeze, or a glad bag and freezing it. It's an anoxic environment (no oxygen). You wouldn't believe the insects come out with colors still. And as you watch them, the color changes from the iridescent blue-green back to a kind of dull black, just in the exposure as they oxidize before your eyes. Even the butterflies come out with pigment and then they just change color.

IT'S ALMOST AS IF THEY WERE QUICK FROZEN.

Almost."



Forensic expert examines specimens from 2001 excavation at Woodburn, Oregon Ice Age archaeological site. Materials such as Ice Age animal hair and soft tissue, as well as human hair, are being analyzed. Photograph © 2001 by Alison Stenger, Ph.D.

More Information:

Professor Orr has even considered the possibility that the black hairs could come from a hominoid such as the mysterious Sasquatch long associated with the northwest. Whatever the hairs' source or sources, it came from someone who was there when elephants, sloths and giant birds lived on the west coast of North America.

Credits

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