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Wrist bones of 'hobbit' offer clue to its origins

Study supports theory that tiny creature was not a modern human

By RANDOLPH E. SCHMID
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Scientists, wringing their hands over the identity of the famed "Hobbit" fossil, have found a new clue in the wrist.

Since the discovery of the bones in Indonesia in 2003, researchers have wrangled over whether it was an ancient human ancestor or just a modern human with a genetic disorder.

Now, a study of the bones in the 3-foot-tall creature's left wrist lends weight to the human ancestor theory, according to a report in today's issue of the journal *Science*.

The wrist bones of the hobbit, technically known as *Homo floresiensis*, are basically indistinguishable from an African ape or early hominid-like wrist and nothing at all like that seen in modern humans and Neanderthals, according to the research team led by Matthew W. Tocheri of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

That indicates that it is an early hominid and not a modern human with a physical disorder, they contend.

The specimen Tocheri studied lived on the Indonesian island of Flores about 18,000 years ago, a time when early modern humans populated Australia and other areas nearby.

"It seals the deal," he said in a telephone interview.

Scientists had thought humans had the planet to ourselves since Neanderthals died out about 30,000 years ago, and the discovery of hobbits indicates another evolutionary cousin who coexisted longer, Tocheri said.

It isn't known whether humans and hobbits coexisted on that island, he said, but it is clear we shared the planet for some time.

"Basically, the wrist evidence tells us that modern humans and Neanderthals share an evolutionary grandparent that the hobbits do not, but all three share an evolutionary great-grandparent," Tocheri said. "If you think of modern humans and Neanderthals as being first cousins, then the hobbit is more like a second cousin to both."

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