

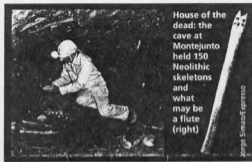
Did Stone Age people dance to the flute?

New Scientist

A BONE artefact discovered in a Neolithic burial chamber in Portugal could force anthropologists to alter their views about the culture of Stone Age people. The bone looks like a flute, and if a replica of the putative wind instrument, made from the bone of a deer, produces the right sounds, it could prove that music was part of Stone Age life.

The "flute" was discovered with many other objects in a huge cave at Montejunto, a limestone hill some 50 kilometres north of Lisbon. The cave served as a necropolis—a house of the dead—between 5000 and 5500 years ago. Although the finds have not yet been dated, the absence of any metal objects at the site suggests it dates to the Upper Neolithic period. Among the 150 skeletons in the tomb were objects including axes, adzes, awls, shell jewellery and bracelets—some still around the bones—and pottery.

The cave at Montejunto was discovered in June by a group of young potholers. One of the group, Rui Mergulho, became trapped by a large rock. With the aid of a car jack, his colleagues raised the rock just enough for him to slide



through a gap onto the floor of the cave.

For most cavers, the excitement of the sport is to reach places no one else has been. But for Mergulho and his colleague Frederico Regala, the thrill was all the greater for discovering the skeletons of people who had been there before, thousands of years earlier. "It was then I felt the real explorer emotion," says Regala. "Especially when my torch caught the perfectly imprinted footprints on the wet clay." These were probably left by the last prehistoric visitor who entered the cave to lay down the body of a relative before the cave was sealed, he says.

The site is now being studied by José

Arnaut, an archaeologist at the Portuguese Institute for Architectural and Archaeological Heritage, and the anthropologist Cidália Duarte of the University of Alberta, Canada. They have excavated an area of 16 square metres in one chamber of the necropolis. "From the homogeneity of the artefacts found near the skeletons, we can say that the cave was used during a period in which there were no changes in the material culture of the local people," says Arnaut.

Although there are differences in the way the bodies were arranged, all except one were placed in communal burial areas within the main cavern. "The sole exception found so far is the corpse of a woman that was found in a room with no other skeletons," says Arnaut.

The way the bones are arranged suggests that the bodies were laid down in a bent position, probably seated, says Duarte. "We can also see from the successive accumulation of skeletons that bodies were laid one on top of the other over the years," she says.

Excavations will begin again in the summer. **Rui de Carvalho**, Lisbon