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Woven cloth dates back 27,000 years



Clay bearing a textile imprint together with a cast

By BBC News Online science editor Dr David Whitehouse

Woven clothing was being produced on looms 27,000 years ago, far earlier than had been thought, scientists say.

It had been thought that the first farmers developed weaving 5,000 to 10,000 years ago.

But Professor Olga Soffer, of the University of Illinois, is about to publish details in the journal *Current Anthropology* of 90 fragments of clay that have impressions from woven fibres.

Professor Soffer revealed some her findings recently when she said that a 25,000-year-old figurine was wearing a woven hat.

If confirmed, her work could change our understanding of distant ancestors, the so-called Ice Age hunters of the Upper Palaeolithic Stone Age.

Accidental imprint

The evidence was obtained from a number of sites in the Czech Republic.

They were the sporadic homes of the Gravettian people who roamed between Southern Russia and Spain between 22,000 and 29,000 years ago scratching out a living on a semi-frozen landscape.

Some of the fibre impressions may have been made accidentally, such as by sitting on a fresh clay

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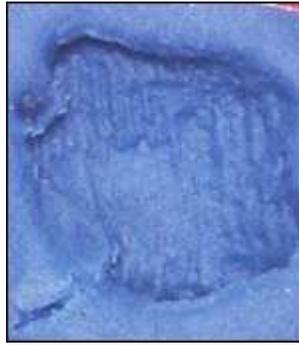
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floor or when wet clay was carried in woven bags.

"Other impressions may have been caused by deliberate action, such as lining a basket with clay to make it watertight," said Professor Soffer.



Close-up, the impression left by the fibres is clearly visible

A detailed examination of the impressions reveals a large variety of weaving techniques. There are open and closed twines, plain weave and nets. Professor Soffer told BBC News Online that twining can be done by hand but plain weave needed a loom.

It may be that many stone artefacts found in settlements may not be objects of art as had been supposed but parts of an ancient loom, which should now be considered as the first machine to be made after the wheel and aids such as the axe, club, and flint knife.

Women's work

This research could force a re-evaluation of our view of ancient man, who lived tens of thousands of years ago, before the last Ice Age had ended and before the invention of agriculture.

The traditional view is of the male Ice Age hunters working in groups to kill large prey such as mammoths. But this may be a distorted and incomplete view of their lives.

All that scientists have from these ancient times are mostly solid remains such as stone, ivory and bone. Now they have evidence of textiles.

The discovery that they developed weaving as early as 27,000 years ago means that we must consider the role that women and children may have played more carefully.



This imprint in clay may have been left by a woven basket

The possibility that they made nets has fascinating implications according to Professor Soffer. It may be that

nets were used by women and children to catch small prey such as hares and foxes.

By catching food this way, women and children could have made all the difference to their communities' food budgets, allowing a surplus to be generated that permitted society to grow.

Further revelations are to be expected in this area of research. There are recent reports that fragments of burnt textiles have been found adhering to pieces of flint.

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