Cannibalism Practiced by Cavemen in France, Anthropologists Believe

By THOMAS H. MAUGH II, Times Science Writer

An international team of anthropologists has found human bones in a cave in France with clear markings indicating that the humans were butchered and eaten like wild animals by neolithic-period cave dwellers. The findings provide the first solid evidence that cannibalism may have existed at some time in the past as a culturally accepted practice.

The report, published in this week's Science magazine, said that three of 10 disposal pits contained the 6,000-year-old human bones that were mixed with bones of domestic and wild animals—suggestive evidence that cannibalism did not occur as a matter of survival.

The researchers said further study is needed to see if the findings represent isolated events or more widely institutionalized practices.

One pit contained remains of three adults, two children and one other person of indeterminate age. A second pit contained three adults and four humans. The researchers could not determine the number in the third pit.

The pits are located in Provence in the Fontibreuse Cave, located between Nice and Marseilles. They were found by a team of researchers headed by anthropologist Paolo Villa of the University of Colorado and Claude Bovillie and Jean Courtin of the University of Provence.

Not 'Looking for It'

"We had no previous interest in cannibalism and were not specifically looking for it," Villa said in a telephone interview. "We were studying hunting and butchering practices by these peoples."

The report comes at a time when many anthropologists have concluded that culturally acceptable cannibalism is a myth that has never been proved. The Provence discovery seems certain to touch off a new round of debate.

Villa and her colleagues first suspected cannibalism when they observed that cut marks on the human bones were identical to cut marks on the animal bones. Nonetheless, Villa said, the group initially thought that the markings were caused by funeral practices.

Many ancient peoples, as well as some primitive tribes today, bury their dead for periods ranging from a month to a year and then consume the bodies and remove what remains of the flesh. The bones are then buried in a bundle or, occasionally, some of the bones, particularly the skulls, may be carried with the tribe as a link to ancestors.

"But then, in 1984, we found this mass of human bones [in the second pit], and the evidence delineates a breakage of the human bones was so strong that we no longer had any doubt," Villa said.

"You can make point-by-point comparisons [between animal and human bones]; the bones have the Please see CANNIBALS, Page 28

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same kinds of marks from being defleshed, they were broken in the same manner for marrow, and they were thrown in the same refuse pits," Villa added.

The clinching argument, the scientist said, was provided by electron microscope specialist Pat Shipman of Johns Hopkins University. Shipman has been studying how bone weather and has found that she can tell from such studies whether marks were made on the bones at the time of death or at some later date after the bones had first been buried.

"At the time the marks were made," Shipman said in an interview, "the bones were very fresh. That's the icing on the cake."

Villa added: "The evidence indicates we are dealing with a group of people captured, possibly as enemies, by a raiding party. They probably lived in the region because they were using limestone of a type that is found in outgrowths about 20 kilometers [about 13 miles] away as bracelets."

"They could have been killed for revenge as enemies, or maybe even for survival. We don't know if it was common or a rare, but accepted, practice. We're now looking for more evidence in the same cave and at other sites in the region."

Much current thinking on the subject of cannibalism was stimulated by anthropologist William Arens of the State University of New York at Stony Brook in his 1979 book "The Man-Eating Myth." After a systematic study of the scientific literature, Arens argued in his book that there was no scientific proof that cannibalism ever existed in the past and that there were no reliable firsthand accounts of cannibalism in the present.

The only documented cases of cannibalism, he said, were instances where it was used as an instrument of sacrifice, such as a rite of Mormon Fehler in Calaveras County in California's Donner Pass or among the Chinese survivors of a plane crash in the Andes.

"If it were cannibalism," Steadman said in an interview, "it's a peculiar kind of cannibalism, because the disease affects primarily women and children. Are they the only ones who eat humans?"

He argued that the disease is spread by the funeral practices of the Fore, which are conducted primarily by women and children, and which involve handling of the skulls and brains of the dead. He—and others—speculate that the infectious agent that causes kuru, which has not yet been identified, is transferred from the hands of the women and children to the mouths of babies in their noses and to their eyes.

Gajdusek has refused interviews on the subject.