

Evidence for cannibalism in the pre-history archaeological record, addressing and understanding the agency behind anthropophagy

What is Cannibalism?

By definition cannibalism in humans (alternatively Anthropophagy) is the practice and custom of eating from the body of another human. (Andrews & Fernandez-Jalvo, 2003, pp. 59)

Cannibalism is often regarded as a taboo or 'uncomfortable' (Cole, 2006) subject in contemporary media and science.

Cannibalism - The Archaeological Record

Archaeological sites and evidence associated with cannibalism in pre-history is a rare and often exclusive find.

Despite this rarity, cannibalism transpired for a complex variety of events and reasons, from cultural, ritualistic, ceremonial to religious or perhaps even personal. (Yin, 2017)

Two well documented examples include:

Late Palaeolithic Magdalenian's: Gough's Cave, in Somerset (Bello et al, 2015, pp. 170-189)

Goyet Neanderthals: Troisième Cavern, In Belgium
(Rougier et al, 2016, pp. 1-11)

Assemblages at both displayed tool worked cut marks amongst other modifications.

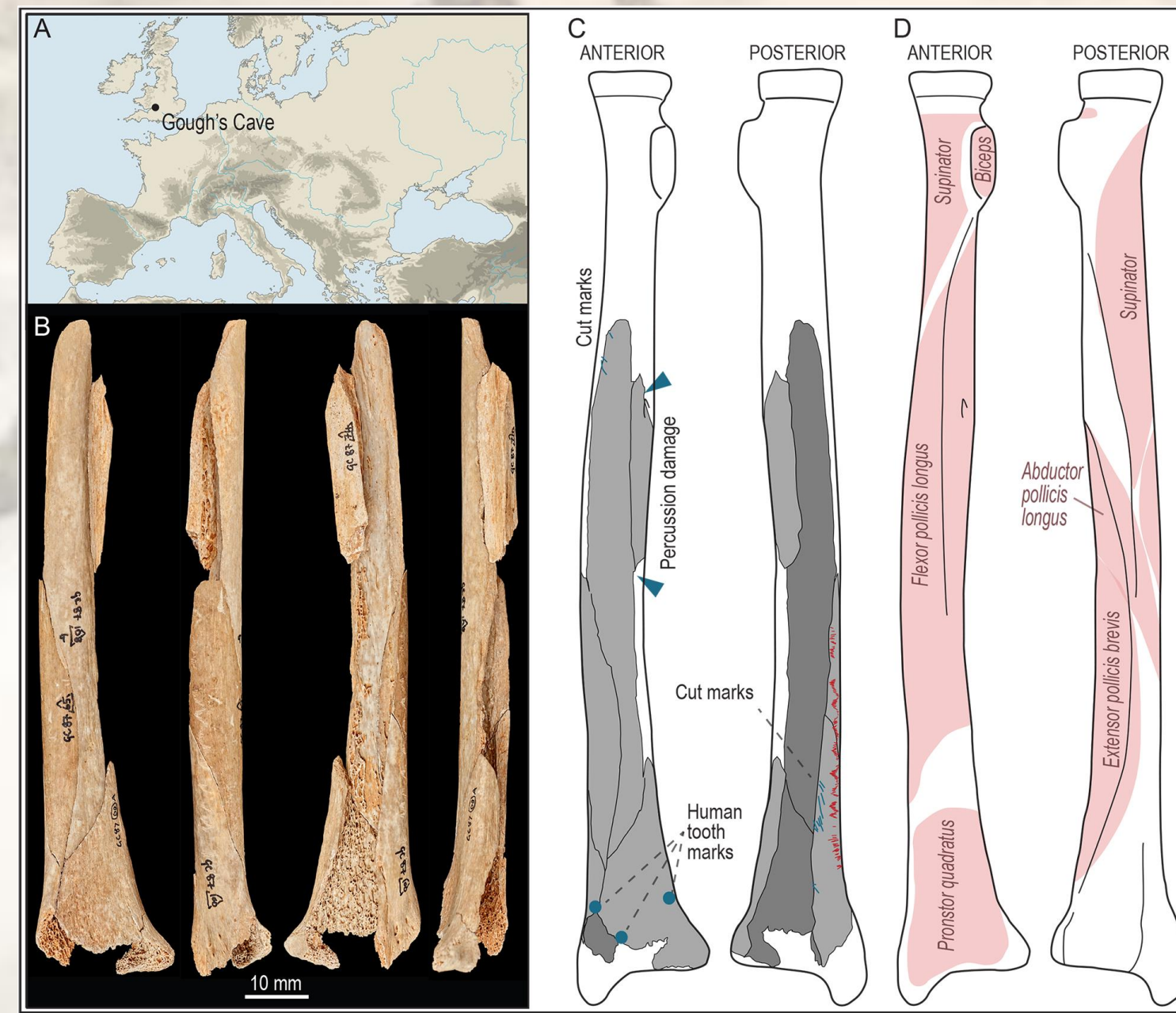
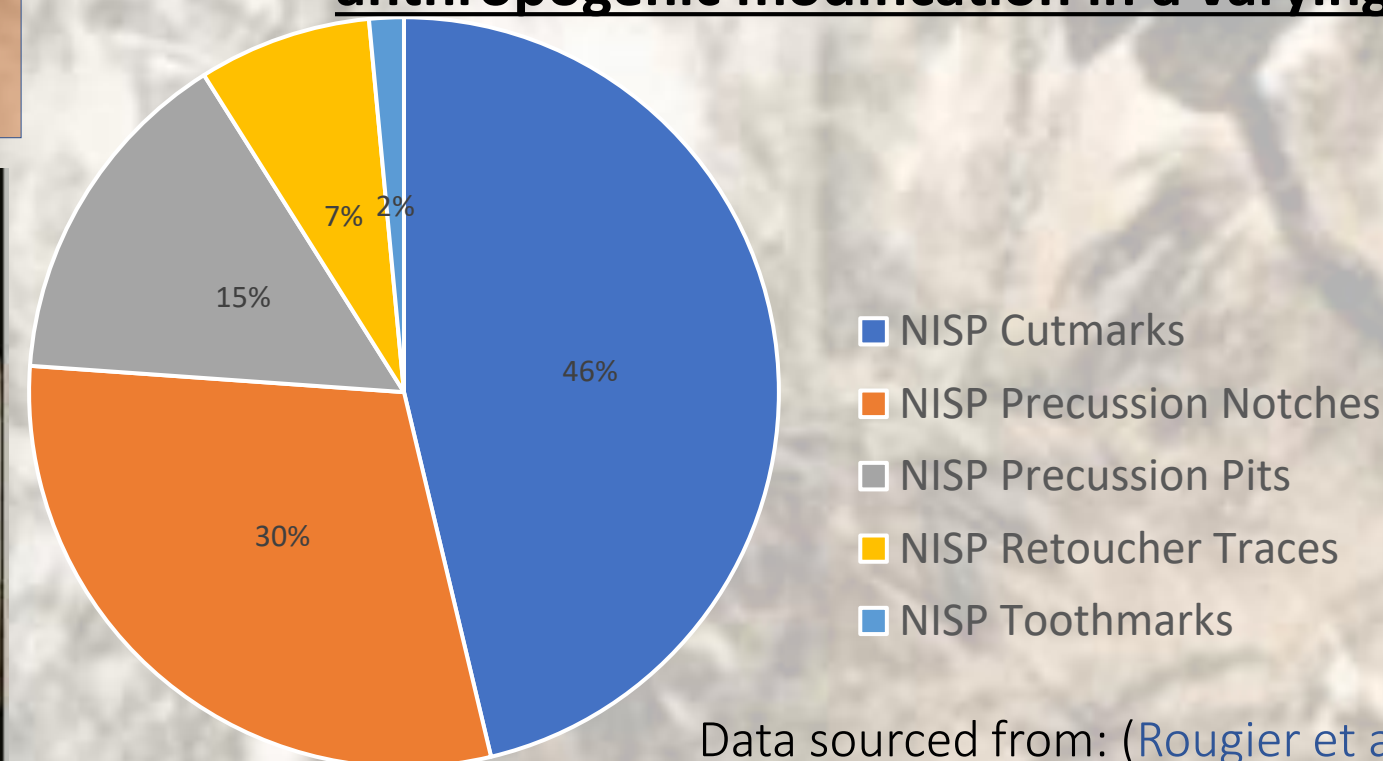


Fig 2. Above - [Bello et al \(2017 pp.2\)](#) Displays a tool engraved human radius (red) and human tooth marks in (blue dots). Displaying human bones were both worked and consumed by Magdalenian's, dating to c. 17,000-12,000 BP ([Bello et al, 2017 pp. 1-2](#))

96 Goyet Neanderthal fragments display anthropogenic modification in a varying ways:



Data sourced from: (Rougier et al, 2016, pp. 4)'

Fig 3. Left - (Bello et al, 2015, pp. 182) Remains from Gough's Cave display an atypical yet purposeful 'zig-zag' cut. Indicative of marrow extraction by a longitudinal breakage, and perhaps ritual markings upon the bone.

The Function of Cannibalism

Cannibalism's common interpretation is 'not ritual but is rather nutritional or dietary' (Saladie & Rodriguez-Hilalgo, 2016, pp. 1035)

Multifaceted nature, ranging from: Exocannibalism (external from the social group), Endocannibalism (from within the social group), Nutritional, or more infamously Survival-cannibalism. (Dole, 1962, pp. 567)

Cannibalism from this perspective may help social groups in possible consolidation of complex relationships and beliefs.

Ritualistic cannibalism could be implied in the bones from Gough's Cave. (Bello et al, 2015, pp. 175)

With 'zig-zag' motifs, suggesting perhaps a complex cannibalistic funerary rituals and rites. In addition the manufacturing of Skull-cups as a possible post filleting mortuary vessel to aid in ritual.

Element	NISP	R-F	A. R-F	C	S	P.D.	P	H.T.M.	MNI
Skull	37	13	1	35	0	15	0	0	5
Mandible	4	1	1	4	0	3	0	0	3
Total cranial bones	41	14	2	39	0	18	0	0	5
Vertebrae	11	1	2	5	0	0	2	8	2
Ribs	54	9	3	30	2	3	23	36	3
Scapula	6	1	1?	5	0	1	0	3	3
Clavicle	3	0	0	3	1	0	1	1	3
Humerus	6	1	0	6	2	6	0	2	3
Ulna	16	4	0	5	0	11	4	9	3
Radius	16	2	0	4	0	6	2	8	2
Hand bones	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	2
Ossa coxae	4	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	2
Femur	21	3	1?	18	1	15	1	5	3
Tibia	11	2	0	7	0	4	1	3	2
Fibula	6	1	0	2	0	5	0	1	2
Foot bones	7	0	2?	6	0	2	0	7	3
Total post-cranial bones	164	24	5 + 4?	95	6	53	36	87	5
Totals	205	38	7 + 4?	134	6	71	36	87	6

^a NISP = Number of Identified Specimens (Lyman, 1994); R-F = refit; A. R-F = anatomical refit; C = slicing cut-mark; S = scrape-mark; P.D. = percussion damage; P = peeling; HTM = human tooth mark; MNI = Minimum Number of Individuals.

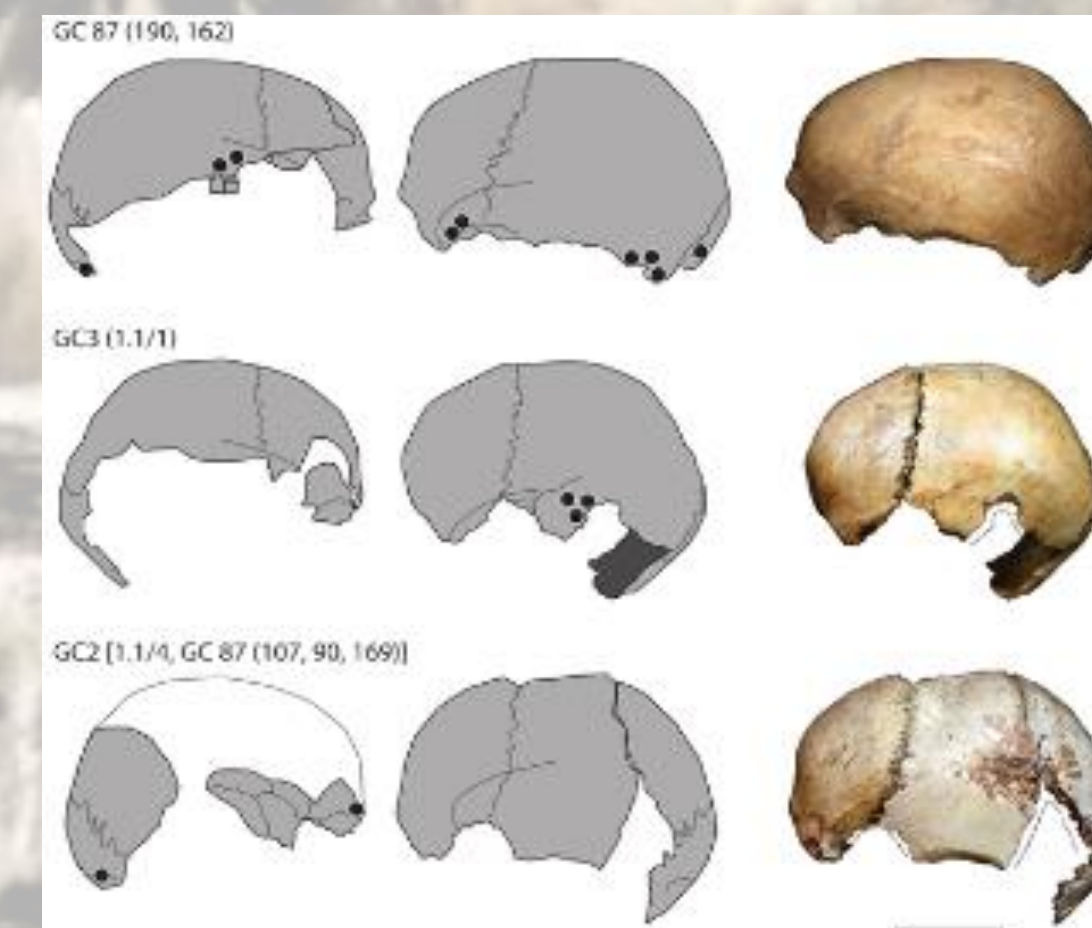


Fig 4. (above) – (Bello et al, 2017) A bone report of the human remains of Gough's Cave. Notably: The 37 cranial bones (Rommel & Reynolds, 2009, pp. 1021) there are 35 cuts, denoting the possible use of cranial-cups or modified bone in funerary ritual and practices.

Fig 5. (left) – (Bello et al, 2011 pp.10) displaying three Magdalenian cranial bones. Black dots marking areas of percussion after which they were cleaned (Bello et al, 2011 pp. 2) Further displaying intended manipulation, with purposeful intent for these assemblages.

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