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Britain Was Settled Seven Times by Ancient Humans Before the Final Settlement

The oldest human settlement was dated 700,000 years ago

A comprehensive study made during the last five years by a large team of scientists including archaeologists, paleontologists and geologists shows that ancient human settlers trying to live in the British Isles were pushed back by glaciation at least seven times before the permanent inhabitation of the Archipelago. It seems that seven gaps on no human settlement occurred from the first inhabitation till now. The current British people are essentially the product only of the last influx 12,000 years. "Britain has suffered some of the most extreme climate changes of any area in the world during the Pleistocene," said Professor Stringer. "So places in say South Wales would have gone from something that looked like North Africa with hippos, elephants, rhinos and hyenas, to the other extreme: to an extraordinary cold environment like northern Scandinavia." "In human terms Britain was the edge of the universe," said Chris Stringer of the Natural History Museum in London. Each colonization occurred in warmer interglacials, when ice sheets retreated northward. Also, human populations could enter Britain when the sea level was low (because much of the oceanic water was blocked in ice sheets), and land bridges between Britain and North Western Europe existed, where now stretches the English Channel and parts of the North Sea. During the cold glaciations, ice sheets advanced as far south as London, pushing away the first colonizers. "Either [the ancient humans] went extinct, or they traveled south and hunkered down in warmer areas such as Spain," said Mark White of England's Durham University, one of the project archaeologists. Dramatic coastal erosion in recent years on the east coast of England exposed many archaeological finds. The team discovered that the first human species to enter Britain did it at least 700,000 years ago, 200,000 years earlier than previously thought. Evidence has been unearthed at Pakefield, located near Lowestoft on Britain's east coast. There were no human fossils discovered but over 30 flint tools have been unearthed, representing the oldest evidence of humans in northern Europe. Animal and plant fossils associated with the site showed a very different picture than that of the current Europe. "The climate was almost Mediterranean, and there were animals like hippopotamuses, hyenas, and lions roaming around," said Simon Parfitt, a mammal fossil specialist based at the Natural History Museum in London. "The kind of tools they used and the animals they hunted indicate that the Pakefield settlers were more human than ape." Parfitt says. "Essentially they would have been very robust early humans, who walked about on two legs and subsisted from hunting and gathering," he said. Ulterior settlers developed more sophisticated tools. Huge piles of butchered and hand axes were discovered at Happisburgh, also on the east coast of England, dated 500,000 years ago. These are thought to belong to Neanderthal people. Scientists think that archaeological remains are found basically only in southern Britain because "Ice sheets would have ground everything to pieces further north," as Parfitt explained. Even so, some evidence of settlement farther north has been found in Wales and in Northern England. The last incursion of big game hunting Neanderthals occurred 60,000 years ago. Thousands of Neanderthal items from this period were found at a quarry at Lynford, near Norwich. Animal bones include the remains of mammoths, rhino and other large animals and show the high technology those people employed to hunt such a big prey. They likely chose the weakest beast in a herd and herded it into a swamp to bring it down. "In the past, Neanderthals have been described as the most marginal of scavengers, and yet we have increasing evidence that they were supreme hunters and top carnivores," said Dr Danielle Schreve from Royal Holloway, University of London. Even if the Neanderthals could cope with cold climate, like

that in which wholly mammoths and woolly rhinoceros lived, they couldn't withstand the extreme cold and vanished with the last ice age outbreak. This glaciation reached its peak 20,000 years ago and finished 12,000 years ago, when modern humans started entering the island. "Australian aboriginals have been in Australia longer, continuously than the British people have been in Britain" said Stringer. Across Northern Eurasia, ancient people could have followed the advance and the retreat of the ice, wandering from Northern to Southern zones and vice versa, but this was not possible in an island. And also, humans didn't always enter Britain in warm interglacial. Probably a combination of factors was necessary. "There were four warm periods where the ice retreated, but humans, as far as we know, didn't come," White said. "The sea level may have been too high for them to cross, or perhaps they were just content to stay in continental Europe," he says. "Or evidence of their presence in Britain during these periods may just not have been found yet." Professor Stringer is confident, though, that major discoveries are still ahead. Many of these earliest human settlements could be spread in what was then a land mass and now is the North Sea. Mammoth fossils are often trawled from the seabed. "There are very many promising sites in East Anglia where there is tremendous coastal erosion going on. That's bad news for the people who live there now; and we don't want it to happen too quickly either because we need time to get to grips with what's coming out of the cliffs."