

# Petralona Man

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In 1960, one of the most interesting and mystifying discoveries in the history of the search for early man was made in northern Greece (see map). This was the Petralona skull (Greece March 15, 1982 Scott No. 1421).

A farmer called Uncle Philipsos from the village of Petralona, located twenty to thirty miles southeast of Thessaloniki, was looking for a source for needed fresh water. On Katsika (Goat) Hill he heard a rushing noise beneath the ground which he took to be a stream of running water. With the help of friends they dug a well.

Instead of a stream they discovered a dry cave. The sounds heard had been winds blowing through the stalagmites and stalactites of the successive caverns which stretched about a mile into the hill. (A view of the cave can be seen on the background of the stamp.)

Various of the villagers explored the cave. On September 16, 1960, one of these, Christos Sarijannidis, squeezed around a rock and found a skull staring at him

Now confusion takes over. The untrained discoverer described his find as a monkey. He also claimed that next to the skull was a whole skeleton lying on its right side. Any confirmation of this became impossible when the villagers made off with the remains. The skull survived this fate because it had become cemented into a pink stalagmite.

This view was effectively challenged by an excavation in the spring of 1968 conducted by the Spelaeological Society of Greece under Aris N. Poulianos. A test trench more than a meter wide and five meters deep was dug in a part of the cave separated from the area where the skull was found. Within this excavation two distinct layers of habitation were found. Within the layers, tools and animal remains were found which led the excavator to conclude that men had been present in Greece from about 500,000 years ago.

In the 1970s further work was done on the faunal material from the excavation. These, along with various absolute dating tests such as radiocarbon, confirmed dates of several hundred thousand years BP.

This led to the conclusion that the skull might be much older than had previously been thought. There was the constant problem that the skull was an isolated find. However, the belief was building that Petralona Man should be dated to about 300,000 BP. Along with this went the view that the skull should be classified as *Homo erectus* or archaic *Homo sapiens*.

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During all this study little attention was paid to the skull itself. This neglect was corrected by Christopher B. Stringer of the British Museum, F. Clark Howell of the University of California (Berkeley), and John K. Melentis of the University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

They describe the skull as being virtually complete lacking only a few teeth and the right zygomatic arch. There is some small damage to a few areas. At the time of the study much of stalagmitic material had been removed. (It has now been completely cleaned.)

Over one hundred separate measurements were made of the skull. These were then compared with other homo remains from this general period. It must be admitted that the results were far from conclusive.

Melentis feels that it is a homo erectus but one distinct from Asian and African examples. He also indicates that it has a close relation to European and African Middle Pleistocene hominids.

Stringer and Howell favor placing it into a category of very early Homo sapiens related to Broken Hill man (Zambia February 1, 1973 Scott No. African rather than Asian Homo erectus.

The problems in classification come from the lack of sufficient fossils, the lack of agreement on determining characteristics for each classification and the variety of views on the evolution of man. One solution is expressed by Loring Brace, who states that the confusion "only point(s) up the fact that erectus ultimately gave rise to sapiens without any conspicuous break." Richard Leakey expresses this same idea saying "we should think of erectus not so much as a true species, but as a stage, a stage in the evolution of ourselves."

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