



New Old Bone Flute

You've probably heard about the 35,000 year old flute they found recently. It seems like every few years they find a flute that's even older than the old flute they found the last time. You wonder if someday someone will declare that the big bang was really a big toot.

It is so exciting to hear the cascade of speculation that arrives as soon as such an artifact is found. Some of it sounds plausible, some feels pretty far fetched, some suggestions border on idiotic. Great sweeping sociological claims are ostensibly proven or disproven. Whole behavioral scenarios are visualized based on the assumptions about the use of the thing. And so forth.

Who knows? Maybe the whackiest of all the flute based theories is the truest of all. Or, maybe the thing isn't a flute in the first place, but is the world's first adjustable shelving bracket.

The most recent flute du jour, as of this writing, was found in a cave in southwestern Germany in September of 2008. For some reason, the find wasn't announced until May of 2009. I think this was to give the inside circle of discoverers the jump on speculation. Everything's a contest. By the time the general public was let in on the situation, the scientists involved had already decided, according to Alan Boyle of MSNBC's Cosmic Log, that, in another, prehistoric contest, "...musical jam sessions may have helped modern humans prevail over their Neanderthal cousins."

To make the guessing game ever more exciting, the item, "... a nearly complete flute hollowed out from the bone of a griffon vulture," was found twenty eight inches from a small sculpture of a voluptuous woman's torso (My observation: I've never chiseled a stone, but I imagine it's easier to carve a voluptuous woman than, say, a scrawny man) that is being called -- with unfortunate sexism, according to many -- "the prehistoric Venus."

So, of course, you find some folks, given this information, making the expected

leap of mind to picture a sex-obsessed music-crazed party culture, much like Madison. And like most everyone else in this guessing fest, they may be right, though of course this goes way beyond the evidence. From what I've read, the flute and figure could be toys, for example. A doll for Pebbles and a noise-maker for Bamm Bamm. As you can see, I can't resist jumping in with my own two cents (or, these days, 44 cents, but I bought the forever speculator).

To make the contest hotter, I should mention that a few years earlier, in 1996, a bear bone, hollowed and pierced with four holes, was found and attributed to Neanderthals of 43,000 years ago. Scientists said, "It's a Neanderthal flute!" Other scientists said, "No, it's not! It's an old chewed bone and that's it!" Other scientists said, "It's an old chewed bone, but Neanderthals USED it as a flute." My guess is that a Neanderthal conceptual artist made a flute to LOOK like an old chewed bone. After all, I have a plastic rhythm shaker manufactured to look like a zucchini squash. There's even a book called *The Singing Neanderthals* by Steven Mithen which theorizes that the Neanderthals had a "proto-linguistic system" more musical than modern languages, predating the separation of language and music. Maybe as a lyricist I'm really a "proto-linguistic Neanderthal." That's the way I feel most days. Anyway, if this bear-bone doohicky is indeed a flute, then the cro-magnon musical supremacy theory needs work.

There is this debate going on too, as seen in the comments section of MSNBC's page:

"It is always interesting to me when someone finds something they say is 35,000 or 50,000 years old. I would have a tendency to believe them, but there is only one problem. This world is only 6,000 to 7,000 years old."

Which triggered this response: "Planet Earth is millions of years old you goob."

Then from another reader: "Some of u idiots may have evolved from monkeys, but not me dude." Still a monkey, apparently.

Another suggestion: "The two hole flute may have been a hunting signal tool, one tone means attack, second tone close in, third tone run away." Mammoth Watch and Mammoth Warning.

And another: "The earliest music was sacred, a call to the divine and accompanied sacred rites."

More: "Maybe it was first used as a tool to scare off dinosaurs." No, that was the accordion.

There is the usual eyeball-rolling going on over here in my bungalow when I read this stuff, but down deep, I love all this creativity, even though speculation has such momentum that it often breaks through the portcullis of possibility and bobs across the moat of reason. Or maybe that's WHY I love it. You can feel it happen in your own cranium. The same creative urge that had cave-people make flutes (or whatever they are) is alive and well in us condo-people, as when, after a handful of blokes admitted to having made the original "crop circles" as a hoax, the UFO-made-crop-circle believers announced that though it was admittedly a hoax, it was because, without their knowing it, aliens had invaded the hoaxers brains and made them do it. Reminds me of a Peanuts strip where Charlie Brown says, looking toward the sidewalk, "Look at that butterfly. You know they fly here all the way from South America." Lucy looks and says, "That's not a butterfly, it's a potato chip." Charlie: "I wonder how that potato chip got here all the way from South America."

But doesn't it all make you wonder yourself? Like, it's SO much easier to carve wood and clay and snow (there is a book called *The History of the Snowman*, written by Bob Eckstein) than stone and bone, you wonder if less durable sculptures were made thousands of years before these newer flutes. And another thing: this newest discovery, when tooted, plays the most common pentatonic scale. Are musical forms and rules to be found in our DNA? And while we're at it, who invented speculation anyway?

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