

A FURTHER RADIOCARBON DATE ON HUMAN BONE MATERIAL FROM AVELINE'S HOLE, BURRINGTON COMBE, MENDIP.

by

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Aveline's Hole lies in the east side of Burrington Combe near its mouth and at the base of the cliff (ST 4761 5867). The cave was discovered accidentally in January 1797. The account included the statement that "a very great collection of human bones was found in different parts of the cave ———". Various accounts agree that the bones were encrusted with stalagmite (Davies 1922). When the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society started their excavation of the cave, the mouth was wide open and most of the stalagmite floor had been removed. Much human bone material was found principally in the first 25cm.

All the records of the excavation, (1919-1930), and most of the material was destroyed in the war. The salvaged material was re-catalogued but, except for a few items marked in pencil with their position in the cave, the catalogue does not give data for position and depth. Sufficient material remains to show that the early accounts as to the quantity of human bones was not exaggerated, and my personal recollections of the excavations are in agreement on this matter of large numbers and the stratigraphical position of the majority of the bones.

The following items were submitted through Mr. R. N. Jacobi, to the Radiocarbon Laboratory at Cambridge University:— M1.13/66 and 67, M1.14/52, 63, 64, 117 and 131. In December 1976 Mr. Jacobi, *in lit*, reported the radiocarbon date as 9090 ± 110 BP (Q-1458). The bones were all partially encrusted with stalagmite.

Another group of human bones, also partially encrusted with stalagmite, had been previously submitted to the British Museum, which reported a radiocarbon date of 9144 ± 110 BP (BM-471).

The two dates are so close together, being separated by only 54 years, that they can be regarded as identical.

The amount of stalagmite on both sets of bones was slight but was enough to place them as being deposited within the closing phase of the use of the cave, when multiple burials began to take place. The Post-glacial deposition of stalagmite within the cave had been very variable in quantity from one area to another, and without knowledge of the exact

location where the bones were found it is unwise to speculate further as to their stratigraphic positions.

A third radiocarbon date for human material from the cave was derived from the stalagmite within a skull. This was thickly encrusted with stalagmite and had its mandible in place. There can be no doubt that it must have been one of the last burials to have been made in the cave, before the cave was sealed, either naturally or by man. The date for this skull is 8100 ± 50 BP (GrN-5393). (Oakley *et al.* 1971). The gap in time between the first two dates and the third date is around 900 years. Such a time gap is not to be regarded as unduly long for a continuing use of a particular cave for human burials.

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