Flores Hobbits’ eating habits offer clues about their evolutionary past

Until about 60,000 years ago, diminutive hominin cousins, *Homo floresiensis* (affectionately nicknamed Hobbits for obvious reasons), shared the island of Flores with Komodo dragons, pygmy elephants, and giant rats.

Based on the presence of hominin and pygmy elephant bones in the same layers of cave sediment, it originally looked like the Hobbits had hunted and butchered dwarf elephants—an impressive feat for such a tiny hominin. But according to University of Tübingen anthropologist Elizabeth Veatch and her colleagues, it was the Komodo dragons that were the hunters, while the Hobbits only showed up to scavenge what was left.

If Veatch and her colleagues are right, their findings may challenge some of the assumptions we’ve made about *Homo floresiensis*—and about which hominin species was the first to venture into the wider world beyond Africa.

These small hominins weren’t big-game hunters

Extinct pygmy elephant bones unearthed at Liang Bua (the cave site that also seems to have sheltered *Homo floresiensis*) are covered in marks from Komodo dragon teeth, as well as cut marks from stone tools. Based on these bones, we know that Hobbits and the ancient ancestors of today’s Komodo dragons shared a taste for the same type of meat: pygmy relatives of modern elephants, called Stegodon. At least three species of

Stegodon lived on Flores, ranging from 1.25 to almost 2 meters tall and weighing anywhere from 500 kilograms to 1.5 tons.

To better understand the Stegodon bones and how they got to Liang Bua, Veatch and her colleagues started by feeding a nearly whole goat carcass to a Komodo dragon (as one does). The Komodo dragon at Zoo Atlanta had its best day ever, and the researchers compared what resulted to the Stegodon bones from Liang Bua.

The Komodo dragon has serrated teeth and a habit of gripping prey and then shaking its head side to side to rip the flesh away from the bone. This left distinctive marks on the bones, marks that were usually shallower, shorter, and wider than cut marks from stone tools. Veatch and her colleagues also noticed that the zoo’s Komodo dragon went straight for the meatiest parts of the body, which happened to be the same areas where archaeologists found tooth marks on the Stegodon bones at Liang Bua: parts like the limbs and the surprisingly fat-rich feet, as well as the ribs.

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