

Maybe the Firvulag did it?
(conspiracy theories anyone?)

Excerpts from Eva Botkin-Kowacki, “Mysterious cave edifice suggests Neanderthals were complex cavemen,” Christian Science Monitor, May 25, 2016

Bruniquel Cave is pitch-black, pools of water cover the floor, and stalactites hang down from the ceiling.

None of these features are surprising to find in an active subterranean cave in southern France. But right in the middle of the cavern floor lies something strange.

Someone has uprooted stalagmites and used them to build something.

Over 1,000 feet from the current entrance to the cave, more than 400 of the oblong rocks are stacked in various structures. Two constructions form short walls as if to enclose a space. The larger one forms a space of more than 220 square feet.

But here’s the catch: The cave has been sealed off and inaccessible to humans for tens of thousands of years.

So who broke off and wrestled about 2.4 tons of rock into neat stacks?

The key lies in when these cave builders worked. A new study published Wednesday in the journal *Nature* finds that these mysterious stacks were built 176,500 years ago, give or take a couple thousand years.

Homo sapiens had yet to migrate out of Africa at the time, and the structures are too complex and large for cave-dwelling bears to have built them. Who does that leave?

Neanderthals were the only human species in the region at that time.

“It adds to the ongoing idea that Neanderthal was more modern than generally thought before,” study co-lead author Sophie Verheyden, a geologist at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, tells *The Christian Science Monitor* in an e-mail. “We never thought he would go so far underground, something that is generally attributed to the modern human” much later.

No sunlight streams this deep into the ground. And there weren’t flashlights 176,500 years ago. So Neanderthals that ventured into this cave would have needed some other light source.

Apparently they had already learned how to control fire by this point. Some of the stacked stalagmites have burn marks on them and some of the structures appear to be hearths of some sort.

“It’s the first really good evidence that we have that Neanderthals penetrated very deep into caves and did something extremely unusual,” Michael Bisson, an associate professor of anthropology at McGill University who was not part of the study, tells the *Monitor* in a phone interview. And, he says, “it’s one of the earliest bits of evidence for the structured use of space in the European archeological record.”

This suggests that early Neanderthal society was remarkably complex and cooperative, compared to previous assumptions.

“This kind of structures requires the mobilization of people who choose, who lead, who advise,” and manufacture things, study co-lead author Jacques Jaubert, a professor of prehistory at the

University of Bordeaux, France, tells the Monitor in an e-mail. And they did it all over 1,000 feet from any source of natural light.

“All this indicates a structured society,” Dr. Jaubert says.

How would Neanderthals use these structures?

“We really don’t know at this stage,” Dr. Verheyden says. The scientists don’t think these people were living in the cave. “We tend to think easily of some kind of ritual or cultural structure but I must say that there is no evidence for it up to now.”

Excerpts from Christopher Joyce, “Mysterious Cave Rings Show Neanderthals Liked To Build,” National Public Radio (NPR), May 26, 2016

It was in 1990 when a French archaeologist first ventured deep into Bruniquel Cave in southwestern France. Spelunkers had just broken through the entrance, which apparently had been obstructed for millennia. The archaeologist traveled deep into the cave, over 1,000 feet. There he discovered something strange — someone had broken stalagmites from the floor and arranged them in two large ovals. But he died before he could fully explore the site.

Twenty-three years later, in 2013, a crew of scientists managed to get back to the site. Geologist Dominique Genty with France’s National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) was there.

“It was very strange,” he says, “it was kind of obvious that it was not natural.”

The team found the circles of stone spikes, almost like 2-foot-high fences. But they found more than the original discoverer. There were more stone fragments lying in piles nearby. It was like a huge Lego set, a Neanderthal Lego set, because all of this calcite stone dated back 176,000 years — long before modern humans arrived in Europe.

Writing in the journal *Nature*, the team says it’s the most complex Neanderthal structure ever found. “We know now,” says Genty, “that they were able to make a sort of elaborate construction,” more elaborate than anything Neanderthals had been known to make.

Why did they build it?

There are only clues. For example, the stalagmite pieces all showed signs of being burned. Was it a ritual? Or perhaps it was a sort of fireplace, to warm them or maybe to repel cave bears. Genty says no one knows.

Then there’s the location, more than 1,000 feet from the cave entrance. Archaeologist Marie Soressi with Leiden University in the Netherlands is a Neanderthal expert and says that’s astonishing.

“What is most surprising for me is that this discovery is showing that Neanderthals ventured underground and far away from any source of natural light,” says Soressi. While Neanderthals no doubt took shelter in caves, they were never known to go that deep, so far from light.

The scientists found pieces of burned animal bone at the site, which they think could have been used as torches because the fatty interior of bone burns.

Soressi points out that recent discoveries keep stoking the argument that Neanderthals were in fact not dumb throwbacks compared to modern humans. “I think ... we have by now many different lines of evidence to show that Neanderthals, and even Neanderthals 200,000 years ago, had cognitive abilities not so different from our direct ancestors.”