

# KING OF THE SWINGERS?

Scientists have discovered a new and tiny species of human that lived in Indonesia at the same time our own ancestors were colonising the world.

The one-metre tall species, nicknamed the “Hobbit”, lived on Flores as recently as 12,000 years ago.

The fact that little people feature in the legends of modern Flores islanders suggests we might have to take tales of Leprechauns and Yeti more seriously.

Australian archaeologists unearthed the bones while digging at a site called Liang Bua, one of numerous limestone caves on Flores.

The remains of the partial skeleton were found at a depth of 5.9m. At first, the researchers thought it was the body of a child. But further investigation revealed otherwise.

Wear on the teeth and growth lines on the skull confirm it was an adult. Features of the pelvis identify it as female and a leg bone confirms that it walked upright like we do.

“When we got the dates back from the skeleton and found out how relatively recently it lived, one anthropologist working with us said it must be wrong because it had so many primitive signs,” said co-discoverer Mike Morwood, associate professor of archaeology at the University of New England, Australia.

The 18,000-year-old specimen, known as Liang Bua 1 or LB1, has been assigned to a new species called *Homo floresiensis*. The researchers have since found remains belonging to six other individuals from the same species.

LB1 shared its island with a golden retriever-sized rat, giant tortoises and huge lizards - including Komodo dragons and a pony-sized dwarf elephant called *Stegodon*, which the Hobbits probably hunted.

It had a skull the size of a large grapefruit and long arms which are an intriguing feature and might even suggest LB1 spent much of its time in the trees.

If there were giant Komodo dragons about you might want to be up in the trees with your babies where it's safe.

LB1 probably evolved from another species called *Homo erectus*, whose remains have been discovered on the Indonesian island of Java.

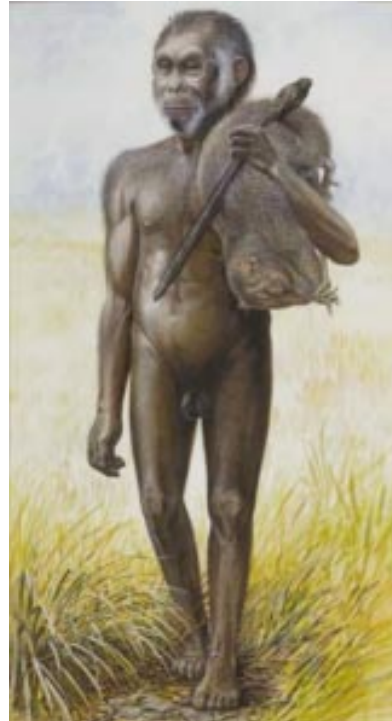
*Homo erectus* may have arrived on Flores about one million years ago, evolving its tiny physique in the isolation provided by the island.

What is surprising about this is that this species must have made it to Flores by boat. Yet building craft for travel on open water is traditionally thought to have been beyond the intellectual abilities of *Homo erectus*.

Even more intriguing is the fact that Flores' inhabitants have incredibly detailed legends about the existence of little people on the island they call Ebu Gogo.

The islanders describe Ebu Gogo as being about one metre tall, hairy and prone to “murmuring” to each other in some form of language. They were also able to repeat what islanders said to them in a parrot-like fashion.

There have always been myths about small people - Ireland has its Leprechauns and Australia has the Yowies and maybe there's some feeling that this is an example



Gogo.

of folk lore, a form of history going back to the survival of these small people into recent times.

The last evidence of this human at Liang Bua dates to just before 12,000 years ago, when a volcanic eruption snuffed out much of Flores' unique wildlife.

Yet there are hints *H. floresiensis* could have lived much more recently than this. The last legend featuring the mythical creatures dates to just 100 years ago.

But Henry Gee, senior editor at *Nature* magazine, goes further. He speculates that species like LB1 might still exist, somewhere in the unexplored tropical forest of Indonesia.

He said the find “rewrites our knowledge of human evolution.” and added: “To have [this species] present 12,000 years ago is frankly astonishing.”

LB1 was an adult female that stood just one metre in height might have evolved its small size in response to the scarcity of resources on the island.

“When creatures get marooned on islands they evolve in new and unpredictable courses. Some species grow very big and some species grow very small,” Dr Gee explained.

The sophistication of stone tools found with the Hobbit has surprised some scientists given the human's small brain size of 380cc, which is around the same size as a chimpanzee.

“The whole idea that you need a particular brain size to do anything intelligent is completely blown away by this find,” Dr Gee commented.

Because the remains are relatively recent and not fossilised, scientists are even hopeful they might yield DNA, which could provide an entirely new perspective on the evolution of the human lineage.



Flores is heavily wooded, rugged, and mountainous, rising to 7,872 ft (2,399 m). The inhabitants are predominantly Christian; those in the west are chiefly Malaysians, and those in the east are Papuans.

Under the rule of the Princes of Sulawesi, Flores came under Dutch influence in 1618. The Dutch gradually gained control of the island, although Portugal held the eastern end until 1851 and the natives were not completely subjugated until 1907. *Jurassic Park? The wife says she feels an affinity!...Mike the Ed.*

